

# Learning From the Novel

Feminism, Philosophy, Literature

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I hereby declare that this is my own unaided work

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## Abstract

Analytic philosophy since Plato has been notoriously hostile to literature, and yet in recent years, increasing numbers of philosophers within the tradition have sought to take seriously the question of how it is that literature can be philosophical. Analytic philosophy has also been noted for its hostility to women and resistance to feminism.

In this thesis I seek to make connections between firstly the prejudice against, and then the potential for, the contribution of the perspectives of literature and feminism in philosophy, attempting to answer simultaneously the two questions;

How can literature be philosophical?  
How can feminists write philosophy?

In the sense that I attempt to take these questions seriously, and answer them precisely, this thesis fits into the analytic philosophical tradition. However, my response to these questions, and thus the majority of this thesis, takes the form of a non-traditional demonstration of the philosophical potential of literature presented through three feminist literary genres; autobiographical fiction, utopian fiction, and detective fiction.

Using generic divisions seems to be an appropriate strategy for reclaiming literature as philosophical, since it suggests an identification with the Aristotelian defence of literary arts against Plato's assault. However, I will argue that these literary genres have traditionally been defined in terms which prohibit a philosophical reading. I will expose and then recover this anti-philosophical bias, particularly when it coincides with feminist genre revisions. This recovery will take the form of a philosophical reconceptualizing of each genre, and a specific comparative analysis of two texts adopted as representative of each genre as I conceive it. In this way I hope to show that it is not only possible, but highly advantageous, to learn from the novel.

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## Introductions: Learning From the Novel

This thesis represents a defence and celebration of the notion that it is both possible and desirable to learn from the novel. In using this phrase, I do not intend to smuggle in any secondary meanings, but rather to refer to a number of possibilities in the most efficient way. I mean “novel” as both a work of literature and something unfamiliar. In the first case, my aim is to show that readers are justified in believing that we may acquire new understanding from the novels which we read. The invocation of the unfamiliar in the second case recognizes and attempts to reassess the restrictive power of tradition, particularly in philosophy. However, this is not regarded as an opportunity to side-step the core issues of each discipline; rather it represents an attempt to find a new way of looking at issues which have been seen through a similar pattern for some time. This is one sense in which my thesis promotes learning. Another sense of this word is referred to in my focus on epistemological issues in literature. I interpret “epistemological” in its broadest sense such that it is not dependent upon a notion of absolute truth.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, it is not incoherent, in my view, to talk about pragmatism as a theory of knowledge. If it were incoherent, then the propositions of pragmatism would have no implications for our systems of belief. All these considerations lead me to attempt to demonstrate how it is possible to learn from the novel in terms of what it is to be a feminist philosophical novel.

The inspirations for this thesis arise from my interest in two intriguing questions.

How Can Literature Be Philosophical?

How Can Feminists Write Philosophy?

The first question in this pair has been raised in the analytic aesthetic tradition. Philosophers have attempted to answer it in terms of a specific examination of the role of figurative language, or the rhetorical origins of language, or by reconceiving truth. And yet the

question, with its attendant tone of incredulity, still remains. One reason for this is, I suggest, that the conceptual structures in terms of which this question is approached, remain either unacknowledged or unquestioned. Specifically, by drawing attention to the ways in which Plato's prescription of the relationship between philosophy and literature has set the agenda for the discussion, I hope to offer a different approach to the question, one which connects it with a feminist agenda.

The second question springs from a western feminist tradition which sees philosophy as a paradigm of patriarchy in the academy. For feminists to involve ourselves in philosophical study, it is said, is for us to sacrifice ourselves to the patriarchal tradition. Other ways of representing feminist thought must be found. I regard the form of the novel in terms of a feminist tradition. By showing that - and how - literature may be philosophical, this thesis discovers new possibilities for a feminist philosophy which is both in and on feminists' own terms. This will call into question the traditions of feminism, philosophy and literature, as each will come to have new relevance for one another. There is an apparently paradoxical aim for this thesis, then, which is the hope that the future will change the past; that my method will spread in all directions facilitating new histories of the disciplines. Yet it is also a claim for the future; I hope to show that this way of bringing together the three elements can be a way of rejuvenating them. In other words, I will provide an in-depth analysis of the edges of philosophy, literature and feminism, as a way of investigating each to the core.

The theme of couplings will reverberate throughout this thesis, since I make a number of divisions in order to explore their validity. I make a distinction between literature and philosophy in order that the division between them be questioned, and the threads which connect them named and explored. The division between women, or more specifically feminism, and philosophy is grafted on to the distinction between literature and philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> This contrasts, for example, with Susan Hekman's view that the very notion of a feminist epistemology is incompatible with

A feminist perspective will be crucial to this thesis, and I take the critique of couplings to be an aspect of this perspective.

I will also refer to and utilize a traditional division between Analytic and Continental philosophy. This is largely a pragmatic rather than an ontological distinction; I am aware that both traditions may be described as fundamentally Kantian, and that the suggestions of geographical specificity are somewhat misleading. However, as an undergraduate I was introduced to the question of how literature can be philosophical from the perspective of an analytic tradition. It seemed to me then, and still does now, that many of the difficulties experienced by those within this tradition who address the question of the relationship between philosophy and literature arise as a result of a reluctance to look beyond their analytic philosophical tradition. On the other hand, continental philosophers have tended to break down the relationship between the two disciplines without exegesis.

Since the question of how it is possible for literature to be philosophical has been raised in the analytic tradition, I propose to answer it as such. More specifically, this thesis relates to analytic philosophy in three ways. First, it is motivated by and written in response to work done by analytic philosophers in connection with the relationship between philosophy and literature. Second, it works out of an analytic tradition. Third, it belongs within the analytic tradition. However, I also believe that any answer to the question of how literature can be philosophical needs to take literature seriously, as continental philosophy so often does, and analytic philosophy so often does not. This is why I choose to offer the bulk of my argument in the form of textual analysis. Since this thesis is written within the terms of the analytic philosophical tradition, this choice may be seen as contentious. However, such a method is commensurate with my broader aims of exploring boundaries in an attempt to expand territories. It does not compromise my claim to be doing analytic philosophy.

Aristotle's defence of literature against the Platonic onslaught is presented in terms of generic divisions. As such, it strikes me as a particularly appropriate choice of method for my project. I also use the method of genre because it makes my theories with regard to specific texts applicable to other texts. In other words, the use of the method of genre is an attempt to claim wider significance for my thesis. This is not to say that it is an attempt to construct a conclusive grand narrative. That is, in the terms of literary criticism, I do not claim that the key to textual meaning may be discovered in philosophical interpretations. Similarly, in the terms of analytic philosophy, I do not offer an essential definition of philosophical literature, in the sense of necessary and sufficient *a priori* conditions for texts to count as such. Rather, I suggest a way of looking at texts which may be helpful to both philosophical and literary disciplines. More specifically, I hope to reconcile the two questions above, and offer a new way of looking at the pair together, through literary genres.

Another reason for the critical adoption of generic divisions relates to the theme of exploring and exposing structures which have a bearing upon the question of how it is possible for literature to be philosophical. I do not claim to offer an exhaustive analysis of either generic literary theory *per se*, or any of the particular genres I examine. Chapters Two, Three and Four will deal with genre rather as a means to an end, with an eye always on the prize of showing that literature can be philosophical.

Because I am attempting to draw together so many different notions and ways of discussing, I begin by sketching a clear picture of the place at which I enter the debates involved. Chapter One, then, will be such a construction. In it, I will establish the Platonic domination of the analytic philosophical conception of the relationship between philosophy and literature, demonstrate the contribution which feminist perspectives can make to the debate, and justify the choices I have made with regard to the methodology I adopt for the remaining three

chapters of the thesis. Chapter Two will discuss the genre of autographical fiction, focusing on some of the ways in which this genre has been neglected or dismissed by philosophers, literary critics, and feminists, before reclaiming it as a feminist philosophical genre, and demonstrating this reclamation with the use of two specific examples, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Chapter Three will look at the ways in which the genre of utopian fiction has been predominantly understood in an anti-philosophical manner, and will redress this, and once more demonstrate its philosophical potential in terms of two examples, Marge Piercy's *Woman On the Edge of Time*, and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground*. Chapter Four will follow the same pattern, this time with the genre of detective fiction, exemplified by the novels of Sara Paretsky featuring the detective V. I. Warshawski, and those of Barbara Wilson featuring Pam Nilsen.

All of these chapters raise more questions than they answer. The most frequent response to papers I have given in relation to this subject is that I have not said what people expect me to say. A general interest provoked by my two questions seems to entice listeners into assumptions about any possible answers. I ought, perhaps, to make clear that I regard the satisfaction of expectations to be outside my remit, and indeed to be outside the remit of any feminist philosophical text. Throughout this thesis I see myself as telling a story about connections between feminism, philosophy and literature. It is only one possible story, told in one possible way. Yet I believe it to be a story worth telling.

### ***A note on style***

Deborah Cameron speaks of her preferred use of feminine generic pronouns in place of masculine generic pronouns as a way of redressing the traditional imbalance of patriarchal



texts, and drawing the attention of readers to the way in which they are being addressed.<sup>2</sup> I take Cameron's aim here to be both noble and desirable, but disagree on the method which she proposes for achieving this aim. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I think that the problem with the use of "he" and "him" as universal is that they simply are not; they do not function as generic. This is just as much the case for "she" and "her". Secondly, I am suspicious of the proposal to use terminology which will 'emphasize women's presence in the world' (p. 126). My alternative proposal is the use of disrupted pronouns s/he and he/r, which are inclusive rather than exclusive, yet also resist the temptation to emphasize anyone's presence, instead merely offering a space for all readers should they choose to activate it. This method leaves me free to use gender specific pronouns purposively.

Although I identify myself as a feminist, and as a reader, and in both of these contexts use collective vocabulary, as far as possible I avoid the oppressive and restrictive form "we", in such constructions as for example "we have seen now that...". Instead I take responsibility for my argument, with the use of the first person pronoun. This is a contentious action, which I perform on the understanding that it signals commitment, and offers the option of reader involvement.<sup>3</sup> My attitude in this matter will form an important part of my argument in Chapter Two, on autographical fiction.

On a more general note, the tone and style of this thesis are largely autobiographical, since it represents my ongoing attempts to speak to and from two disparate and estranged academic disciplines. In addition, writing as a feminist means for me continually revising strategies of expression, which often necessitates rejecting the teaching of both disciplines. There are dangers here; to philosophers I may often sound whimsical and obtuse; literary critics may hear the same words as hectoring and simplistic; to feminists I may also sound aggressive and

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<sup>2</sup> See Deborah Cameron, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, 2nd edn. (London: MacMillan, 1992), pp. 125-6. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> For an evocation of a feminist perspective against using the first person pronoun see Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1945), pp. 98-99.

individualistic. Although I strive to write as clearly as possible on the issues as I see them, I am also keen to incorporate into my writing a sense that things are rarely as simple as they seem. In this way I attempt to produce a text which enacts one of my principles of connection between the three disciplines which I invoke; specifically I would like it to function as an incitement to read.

## Chapter One

### Overture: Philosophy, Literature, Feminism

Interdisciplinary relationships between the three elements of this thesis are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. For example, it is now possible to refer to feminist philosophy, feminist literature, philosophical literature and literary philosophy as specific areas of study. Yet in each of these cases there may be said to be a master discipline. In other words, just as the noun controls the adjective in grammatical terms, so one discipline controls the other. This controlling effect works in two contradictory ways. Whilst interdisciplinary concerns remain confined within the noun discipline, they also remain marginalized within that discipline, and so ultimately regarded as unconnected with and unnecessary for, the important concerns of the field. Viewed from within the boundaries of each discipline, combination with another is often seen as a dilution of its strength, or worse, as if interdisciplinarity involves adding impurities to the pure. The suggestion seems to be that nothing is gained, and something vital is lost when any intellectual coupling takes place.

If pairings are looked upon with such suspicion, my task of bringing together three disciplines seems quite daunting, and if progress is to be made, a reconsideration of the interdisciplinary relationships involved will be crucial. In this first chapter, then, I intend to draw a conceptual picture of the interaction of the three disciplines, within the terms of a structure of tradition.

Those texts which form part of a tradition are chosen for many reasons other than that they are the best or most accurate ideological texts. Indeed, it is not even clear what criteria could be used to decide what would make a text a “good” or “accurate” part of a tradition. As part of my investigation into how traditions work, I will attempt to find representative examples

of cultural attitudes which will contribute towards an explanation of the continued estrangement, and the potential for conciliation, of the mainstreams of both philosophy and literature. I do not claim to be exhaustive in this endeavour. Rather I intend to trace a range of representative conceptions of the relationships between, and avail myself of any useful strategies for conciliation I find along the way.

I will attempt to overcome the problems identified by trying to find out how the relevant interdisciplinary relationships are possible, establishing what it is about each element which touches on the others. The combination, and eventually mixture, may then be seen to work with rather than against the principles and practices of each discipline. In this way I hope to dispense with the notion of master disciplines, and use disciplinary adjectives with impunity.

My approach is an analytic one, and the philosophers I seek to address are those in the analytic tradition who have attempted to deal with the problem of how it is that literature might be philosophical. That the question arises in the analytic tradition is something I find particularly fascinating, since this school of philosophy has been traditionally hostile towards literature.<sup>1</sup> I aim to draw to the attention of these philosophers certain connections between this question and the question of how it is possible for feminists to write philosophy. Such connections have not been made to date by any analytic philosophers. I intend to make it here, in order to construct coherent responses to both questions. I take as my starting point the premise that analytic philosophy has expressed a traditional hostility to the role of both literature and feminism in philosophy, and seek to confront these hostilities in collaboration.

I shall begin this project chronologically, focusing first on the 'ancient quarrel' between philosophy and literature, and thus introducing my claim that Plato's analysis of the relationship between the two in the *Republic* has cast a shadow upon analyses of their

relationship in the two thousand years which have followed. From there, I will move on to describe contributions made to each of these disciplines by feminism. By looking at feminist perspectives on the two, I will suggest, again with the use of representative examples, that where philosophy has been mistrustful of the contributions to be made by feminists, literature has at least been ambiguous in its attitude. I will then be in a position to state clearly my method for and purpose in showing what it means to be a feminist philosophical novel, and so provide a prelude to the following chapters' celebrations of learning from the novel. This celebration will involve taking work written in the form of the novel seriously, and also recognizing the progressive effects which practitioners in the fields of feminism, philosophy, and literature can potentially have on each other's worlds.

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<sup>1</sup> For an exposition of the history of this hostility, see Jonathan Rée, *Philosophical Tales: An Essay On Philosophy and Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 1-4.

## **A. The Ancient Quarrel**

Although the general subject areas of philosophy and literature have many points of contact, there are relatively few explicit studies of how it might be possible for literature to be philosophical. Perhaps, it may be suggested, such a study is not needed. After all, isn't it self-evident that the two impinge on each other? Whilst it is true that literary theory in the twentieth century has crept further and further into the field of philosophy, and also that philosophers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of the ways in which they write, the two disciplines remain as distant and mutually mistrustful as ever. Meetings are temporary and conditional, and fail to affect either field. That this is the case is due, I suggest, to two dominant attitudes towards the subject upon which I now write; from the philosopher's perspective, that literary art cannot approach philosophical ideas in a satisfactory manner, and from literature, that it is so obvious that literary art does discuss such ideas, that there is no need to defend the notion at all.

I suggest that these two attitudes, although apparently contradictory, in fact are related in interesting ways, and may be traced back to their inheritance of a tradition which has confined and delimited the potential of the relationship. I will begin this section by looking at ways in which philosophy has touched upon literature, and *vice versa*, in order to gain insights into the difficult dynamics of the relationship, in particular as it is determined within the terms of a tradition. Only when I have exposed these dynamics will it be possible to move on to a third point of view, which proposes to show precisely that literature can be philosophical; that in this way it is possible to learn from a novel. The defence of this proposition, in its strongest form, will provide the conclusion for this section.

## 1. PHILOSOPHY

Poetry might accuse us of insensitivity and lack of culture, so we'd better tell her that there's an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

I want to talk about Plato's attitude to the relationship between philosophy and literature for two fundamental, connected reasons. One is that it is a clearly defined, widely read, early statement of a position which I will go on to show has been remarkably influential. The other reason I want to start with Plato is that the way in which his position is put, and the way in which others have accepted it, highlights one of the most important ways in which traditions operate in the fields of both literature and philosophy. My attitude is that this operation has typically taken place behind the scenes. So for example, although analytic philosophers often pick up on Plato's critique of imitative art, few choose to make explicit the extent to which the resulting conception of literature is fundamentally dependent upon a particular interpretation of the role and significance of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Those who do perceive the structural significance of Plato's conception of a literature defined in terms of a negation of philosophy have failed to draw out the force of the distinction by neglecting to take into account the sexual politics of the system.<sup>4</sup> One of the tasks of this thesis is to drag the presentation of the relationship between literature and philosophy in the *Republic* to centre stage, and to offer an original interpretation of that relationship as one which takes account of

<sup>2</sup> Plato's *Republic*, trans. and ed. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 607b. Subsequent paragraph references will be given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> A rare recent exception to this may be found in Christopher Janaway's thorough and brilliant *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), which offers a survey of Plato's attitude towards art throughout his works. Janaway acknowledges that in the *Phaedrus* Plato defines literary skill negatively in order to 'discriminate the philosopher from the mere writer, or the poet' (p. 167). However, Janaway's uncritical project leaves this discrimination unquestioned, and so the author misses the opportunity to explore further the interdependency of the Platonic conceptions of literature and philosophy.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies In Ancient Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1988). The value of Rosen's argument here may be seen in his acknowledging the radical implications of Plato's analysis of the relationship between literature and philosophy. Rosen asserts that 'the possibility of philosophy depends upon whether the coherence of diversity [...] provides us with the means to a poetic production of the whole, without itself being a poem' (p. xi). But Rosen seeks to argue that the distinction between Plato and Socrates serves to figure a disruption of oppositions such as that between literature and philosophy, and that the presentation of the ancient quarrel in the *Republic* participates in that feature of Plato's philosophical works which may be seen in terms of their being 'philosophically "self-conscious"' (p. 31). As such, the ancient quarrel demonstrated in the *Republic* may be seen to present an organic whole, which successfully presents a problem, and in doing so, offers that presentation as the solution to the problem. For a more general application of the principle that the way in which Plato constructs his dialogues as literature has a bearing upon the philosophical implications of the works, see Eugenio Benitez, 'Characterisation and Interpretation: The Importance of Drama in Plato's *Sophist*', *Journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*, 6 (1996), 27-39. For both of these commentators, the literary status of the dialogues complicates their philosophical implications, but ultimately may be seen to present an original key to the texts, a way of making them mean. In contrast, it is my suggestion that a reading of the presentation of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature in the *Republic* which takes gender into account complicates without offering solutions.

a feminist politics, and which, as a result of this new perspective, is able to analyse the relationship between literature and philosophy from a different and enlightening perspective.

With references in the *Republic* to an 'ancient quarrel', Plato naturalizes the dichotomy he sets up between literature and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Waiving responsibility for the system he outlines allows Plato's judgements to remain unchallenged, and makes the unquestioned acceptance of the dichotomy and its associations by subsequent writers almost inevitable. In very simple terms, this describes a significant way in which traditions may operate.

In the *Republic*, Plato is famously hostile to artists, in particular literary artists, and their creations. In Book 2 of the *Republic* Socrates warns of the dangerous power of stories and how they may affect societies - fictitious stories are thought to be particularly harmful, especially to those who don't know any better, for example children. Planning primary education in the ideal state, Socrates asks rhetorically;

Shall we, then, casually allow our children to listen to any old stories, made up by just anyone, and to take into their minds views which, on the whole, contradict those we'll want them to have as adults? (377b)

The only possible conclusion is that citizens of the ideal society may only be exposed to literature which has undergone heavy censorship. The role of fiction in the new republic is to work with the establishment and so texts must be approved by the guardians of the society.

Part of the reason that poets are considered so dangerous in the *Republic* is that their skills are not based on reason but rather produce artefacts which are the enemies of reason, inciting subversive elements and exciting baser instincts. This is because they appeal to the irrational part of our natures, and encourage emotional reactions to events;

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout the *Republic*, Plato refers to arts as a whole, arguing that what is said of one art may be applied to the arts generally. Throughout, I take Plato's remarks about narrative poetry to be similarly applicable to all literature, and particularly novels, since this latter may be said to constitute the popular form which narrative poetry was when the *Republic* was written. This is a fairly conventional interpretation, for a full exposition of which see James O. Urmson, 'Plato and the Poets', in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, ed. by Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko (Totawa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1982), pp. 125-136. For an unconventional interpretation of Plato's generic applicability see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993), esp. pp. 67-70.



If you admit the entertaining Muse of lyric and epic poetry, then instead of law and the shared acceptance of reason as the best guide, the kings of your community will be pleasure and pain. (607a)

In Book 10, Socrates places his criticisms in the context of an ancient quarrel between poets and philosophers. Historically, both of these professions claimed to offer truths about our lives and the world. As Iris Murdoch points out;

the poets had existed, as prophets and sages, long before the emergence of philosophers, and were the traditional purveyors of theological and cosmological information.<sup>6</sup>

In crude terms, the philosophers represent oracular competition for the poets. Yet for Plato, only the philosophers - who will also rule his utopian society - have access to true knowledge and the Forms, or the ideal world of universals. According to Plato's metaphysics, the world that people see and live in is an imperfect copy of this ideal - and only truly real - world, and it is this world which artists choose to represent. By analogy, Socrates argues that this places poets at a third remove from reality (595a-602b). Moreover, to write in a literary form is to admit to not really knowing about the subject; after all, Socrates says

I'm sure that if [the poet] really knew about the things he was copying in his representations, he'd put far more effort into producing real objects. (599b)

Here Plato focuses on the creators for criticism; it is their failings which make their works dangerous. Thus literature is intolerable in the ideal society because its creators are writing about subjects of which they have no knowledge, and truths to which they have no access. Literature, and those who insist upon creating it, are to be banished from the republic.

Plato does allow for the possibility that poetry may be reintroduced into the republic in the future. Poets may be admitted back into the republic if, instead of writing 'for pleasure', they 'come up with a rational argument for their inclusion' (607c). Another option is to allow those who are not poets, but could argue for poetry, to defend it in the poets' absence (607d). Most importantly, the readmission of literary artists into the republic should not involve 'compromising the truth as we see it' (607c). Literary artists, then, must adapt their conceptions as well as their expressions to those of philosophy, and if they are unable to do this, must rely on others outside the field of literature to prove the potential and worth of literature, by interpreting the literature which cannot justify itself.

In the *Republic*, Plato tells us that the relationship between literary artists and philosophers has long since been characterized by antagonism. As a philosopher, Plato seeks to preserve this tradition by recommending that literary art be banned from any ideal society. He

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<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 1. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

associates literature with moral turpitude, and labels her an enemy to truth. In contrast philosophers are to be entrusted with ruling the utopian republic, making its laws and preserving its citizens from all that may endanger the society. Literary art, then, is depicted as an element which threatens the truth and moral purity of a world created by philosophers - she is an agent of corruption, to be feared by all who value a philosophical outlook.

However, literature may be used as a tool by the philosopher. This is made clear in two ways; firstly, with the creation of the *Republic* as itself a literary text, and secondly, with an explicit defence of literary forms by Socrates as philosopher in Book 6, where he asserts his right to prove a philosophical point in the only way he sees possible, telling Adeimantus; 'it'll take an analogy to answer your question' (487e).<sup>7</sup>

Literature, here in the form of the dialogue, is a tool, to be called upon by the philosopher in his attempt to relate his ideas to other lesser beings. Within this literary form, the literary form of the analogue may be used to make points clearer. As a non-poet, Socrates does not need to have these stories interpreted. His profession allows him to assert

I'm sure you don't need an analysis of the analogy [...] I'm sure you take my point.  
(489a)

With this, Plato offers us a simple answer to the question of how literature can be philosophical, which is also how literature might be valuable; by being written by a philosopher, and being a part of philosophy. As a result, I shall refer to the sanctioned manipulation of literature by philosophers as their taking the Socratic stance.

A summary of Plato's conception of the relationship between philosophy and literature may be outlined in terms of four Platonic claims;

1. Literature presents a danger to philosophy from which the latter must be protected.
2. Where philosophy expresses and develops the rational and the true, literature may be associated with the irrational and the false.
3. Literary artists are intellectually inferior to philosophers, and to write literature is to admit to a lack of knowledge about philosophical matters.
4. Literature may be manipulated by philosophers to become ethically and socially acceptable, perhaps even valuable.

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<sup>7</sup> Earlier translations incorporate an even greater sense of compulsion here. See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Paul Shorey (London: Heinemann, 1935), where Socrates says that Adeimantus' question 'requires an answer expressed in a comparison or parable'; Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1987), where Socrates admits that he 'must give [Adeimantus] an illustration'; and the translation which appears in Francis MacDonald Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), where Socrates says he has been asked 'a question which needs to be answered by means of a parable'.

The first three descriptions of the relationship between philosophy and literature facilitate the fourth and final prescriptive claim. As the culmination of the value system, it forms a crucial consideration for my analysis of how literature might be philosophical, because it offers an explanation of what is to be done about the quarrel between philosophy and literature. I will argue that it is this prescription which has proved most problematic for attempts to answer the question.

In the meantime I want to draw attention to the patriarchal terms of the Platonic value system, created through the four Platonic claims. Explicitly, literature is said to be dangerous because it brings about a state of mind which is associated with women (605d-e). Even without explicit genderizations of the debate, the value system which is naturalized in Plato's conception of the relationship between literature and philosophy is implicitly patriarchal. Literature is criticized as immoral and lacking wisdom, in contrast with philosophy, which has positive, opposing associations, and as such is properly superior to literature. Literature is depicted as unpredictable and hopelessly unreliable, unless placed under the subjection of philosophers. Literature is a paradigm case of the patriarchal other; she is the threat from whom male philosophers should be protected, and that which must come under their control.

Plato's value system preserves a tradition whereby philosophy is valued over literature; the practitioners of the first have intellectual and, ideally, political power, whilst the practitioners of the second will be excluded from society. In cultures where gender divisions are similarly evaluative, the two sides of the dichotomy are easily translated into biological terms; it becomes accepted that men write philosophy, which is important, whilst women write literature, which isn't. This is how the aesthetic preference of an 'authoritarian moralist' (Murdoch, p. 86) is turned into biological determinism. The gender associations of philosophy and literature, and the cultural implications of these associations, may be perpetuated by any collusion with the Platonic forms.

One of the most common forms of collusion is, I suggest, apparent in the operation of the sanctioned manipulation of literature by philosophers, or their taking the Socratic stance. Radical manifestations of this principle occur in both analytic and non-analytic philosophy. A recent example of the former would be Jostein Gaarder, who, in the novel *Sophie's World*, seeks to present philosophical ideas in a literary form.<sup>8</sup> In the case of non-analytic

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<sup>8</sup> *Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy*, trans. by Paulette Møller (London: Phoenix, 1995). Other successful examples in recent years include Robert M. Pirsig's two novels, *Zen* and *The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An*

philosophy, Sartre is a philosopher who has famously attempted to express his philosophical ideas in literary form.

In both of these cases, literature has been courted at the expense of marginalization from the philosophical establishment. For example, having conducted a straw poll amongst a number of contemporary British philosophers, a *Guardian* journalist writes with confidence that despite its popularity '*Sophie's World* is utter junk. Pretty well all professional philosophers think so'.<sup>9</sup> This remark is ironic because when Gaarder wrote this novel he was employed as a philosopher. The distinction between a novelist and professional philosopher seems natural precisely because the one is taken by definition to exclude the other, or, in Gaarder's case, perhaps, the professionalism of the philosopher is understood to be compromised by the adoption of the Socratic stance.

Less harshly, but perhaps more patronizingly, in a summary/ introduction to Sartre's philosophical novel *Nausea* designed for undergraduate students, Stephen Priest writes;

The fictional format allows [Sartre] to dispense with arguing for existentialism and in the absence of argument we might as well believe the opposite.<sup>10</sup>

I take Priest's remarks on Sartre's *oeuvre* to be representative of the attitude that philosophers' sojourns into literature can be legitimately ignored by philosophers. According to such an attitude, literature, even literature produced by a philosopher who takes the Socratic stance, has nothing to offer philosophical debate. This is because it adopts the wrong style, a style which is characterized by absence; it lacks an argumentative posture. The fact of its having a literary style prevents it from counting as philosophy. This hostility towards literature may be said to have its roots in the *Republic*, where Plato wants literary works first censored, and then banished, so that he does not have to deal with them at all. Literary works, because they are literary, are to be curtailed in significance, and then made invisible to philosophers.

As a result, whilst it may seem that these philosophers are successfully overcoming the Platonic value system, in fact they are conforming faithfully to it. Adoption of the Socratic stance leaves in place the patriarchal value system which sees literature as a tool at the disposal of the philosopher, whose position, both within the tradition and as originator and controller of the ideas of that tradition, remains pivotal and unquestioned. When

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*Inquiry Into Values* (London: Vintage, 1991), and *Lila: An Inquiry Into Morals* (London: Bantam, 1991), and Tibor Fischer's *The Thought Gang* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Turner, 'Laura and Paul Do Profundity', *Weekend Guardian*, 8 June 1996, pp. 22-28 (p. 23).

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Priest, 'Jean-Paul Sartre: An Introduction', in *Philosophy ICH 1994/ 5: Course Reader and Lecture Summary* (Dept of Philosophy, University of Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 97-149 (p. 102).

philosophers appropriate literary forms, such forms no longer present the threat which so worried Plato, because the literature remains under the control of the omniscient philosopher. This is because the kind of thinking which the philosopher has achieved may be thought of as enabling him to use certain ideas which, in others, would prove dangerous.<sup>11</sup> In other words, when philosophers adopt the Socratic stance, it matters not whether the resulting texts are labelled philosophical literature or literary philosophy; philosophy, understood as a personification of the creator behind it, counts as the master discipline, and, in the terms of the Platonic value system, as the discipline of the master.

This is why the mere fact of philosophical ideas being written in a literary form does not constitute a resolution of the problem of how it is that literature can be philosophical. It does not confront the Platonic value system. A more radical response is required. Richard Rorty is a philosopher who has presented such a response. He has sought to reverse the Platonic binary opposition which always prioritizes philosophy over literature. Explicitly proclaiming the end of philosophy, he prophesies that the ideas which philosophy formerly contained will be liberated by a literature which supersedes it.

Rorty argues that the Platonic influence on philosophy has been fundamentally misguided. It has effectively restricted the scope of its own concerns.<sup>12</sup> Rorty argues that traditional (Platonic) philosophy makes the mistake of defining its project as the search for absolute truth and absolute value. Rorty's pragmatism seeks to encourage philosophers to abandon this project, and instead to concentrate on the search for the most useful styles and modes of expression of ideas about the world. Once this has been achieved, philosophers can appreciate, as 'literary criticism' already has, that

the creed or the philosophical doctrine becomes the emblem of the novelist's character or the poet's image, rather than converseley [sic].<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Rorty's conception of traditional philosophy seems to offer a new awareness of the sexual politics involved, by developing a Derridean notion of philosophy and writing as distinct forms of sexual activity;<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Descartes' search for a model of scientific, excessively objectified knowledge is presented by Susan Bordo in terms of a desire for a 'state of mental readiness,' after the achievement of which 'the mind's *subjective* responses - its convictions - can be trusted.' See *The Flight To Objectivity: Essays On Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 92, author's italics.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> See Richard Rorty, 'Professionalized Philosophy and Transcendent Culture', in *Consequences of Pragmatism: (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 60-71 (p. 66).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay On Derrida', in *Consequences*, pp. 90-109 (pp. 106-109). Subsequent page references will be given in the text. For Derrida's remarks on this matter see Jacques Derrida, ' "...That Dangerous Supplement..." ', in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 141-164.



In normal physics, normal philosophy [...] one hopes for the normal thrill of just the right piece fitting into just the right slot [...] Writing, as Derrida says [...] is to this kind of simple "getting it right" as masturbation is to standard, solid, reassuring sex. This is why writers are thought effete in comparison with scientists - the "men of action" of our latter days. (p. 106)

Rorty challenges this conception, to argue that the "masturbators" may be seen as sexually adventurous; that post Derrida, the contrast between those embarrassed by the mediated nature of their work on the one hand, and those who celebrate the written on the other now appears as that between the man who wants to take (and see) things as they are, and the man who wants to change the vocabulary presently used for isolating pieces and holes. (p. 107)

Rorty here offers the suggestion that the masculinism of traditional philosophy may be rejected for even better things.

At first glance, Rorty's doctrine of pragmatism appears to be an adequate rebuke of the Platonic value system which I outlined at the beginning of this section. Moreover, the notion that rejecting traditional Platonic philosophy will mean rejecting the associations of machismo which philosophy often seems to harbour, is clearly appealing to feminists.

However, in terms of my project, there are two significant problems with Rorty's work. First of all, Rorty does not dismantle Plato's dichotomy; he merely reverses it. Since under the Platonic value system, literature is philosophy's negation, it is the obvious place for Rorty to turn to for salvation. Yet the preservation of Plato's dichotomy, in spite of its being reversed, entails that literature is valued purely on the basis that it is not philosophy. Literature is revalued at the expense of philosophy, because literary writing, and the possibilities of hermeneutics, counts as the dross which remains when metaphysical philosophy has been discounted.

One of the consequences of this is that all those features which Rorty rejects in philosophy, must be denied in literature. The principle notions discarded by him are argumentation, and seriousness. With regard to the former, he offers a definition of literature as 'the areas of culture which [...] forego argumentation'.<sup>15</sup> This places Rorty in agreement with Priest's (Platonic) remark about Sartre's literature; that it does not constitute an argument because it is literature.

Neither is literature allowed to be serious. Rorty says, for example, that Dewey is appealing to the pragmatist because his writing

helps us to put aside that spirit of *seriousness* which artists traditionally lack and philosophers are traditionally supposed to maintain.<sup>16</sup>

Plato would agree with Rorty on this, as I have suggested, but connections might also be made with Searle, who identifies the difference between fictional and nonfictional discourses as one between 'nonserious' and 'serious' uses of language.<sup>17</sup> Searle argues that this means that, for example, the views expressed in a novel are not ones which could be said to be 'seriously committed' (p. 321). The inadequacy of Searle's application of speech act theory to fictional texts has been roundly criticized.<sup>18</sup> Whilst Rorty does not wish to define literature negatively in this way, he offers a limitation upon his understanding of literature as philosophical, by saying that the application of this adjective is dependent upon literature being regarded as nonserious.

As a result, Rorty's understanding of literature is seriously inhibited by his "ulterior motives". I am referring to the way in which his revaluation of literature at the expense of philosophy is inextricably connected with his pragmatist philosophy. Again, the pragmatist's affirmation of the value of literature as offering philosophical understanding most definitely involves 'compromising the truth as we see it' (*Republic*, 607c). In this, then, Rorty is in agreement with Plato, differing only in his view that this danger is not one from which philosophers should be protected, but rather that they should be exposed to it and admit defeat. Little wonder then, that philosophers' rendezvous with literature are regarded with suspicion by traditional philosophers - under a Rortian analysis, these meetings not only threaten the special powers which philosophers have to offer insights into our lives and the ways in which we live them, but also threaten to label this endeavour as completely misguided.

Rorty's version of pragmatism insists that literature is important because philosophy is just another 'kind of writing' ('Philosophy As', p. 92) and so that there is no reason to value the latter over the former. On this view, the valuing of literature marks some kind of conclusion to philosophic study. This attitude is in harmony with Plato's view of the threat which literature poses for philosophy, insisting as it does that literature threatens to dismantle the whole philosophical enterprise. As part of this negative focus, Rorty seeks to value the status of literature as a game, or as merely therapeutic, allowing the writer to make no claims for the

<sup>15</sup> 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', in *Consequences*, pp. 139-159 (p. 142).

<sup>16</sup> 'Dewey's Metaphysics', in *Consequences*, pp. 72-89 (p. 87, author's italics).

<sup>17</sup> John R. Searle, 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse', *New Literary History*, 6:2 (1975), 319-332 (pp. 320-321). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Stanley E. Fish, 'How To Do Things With Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism', *Modern Language Notes*, 91:5 (1976), 983-1025 (esp. pp. 1011-1023).

way the world is, and so have no responsibility for its place in the world. Again, this places Rorty's analysis in the Platonic tradition.

Those who value literature might be wary of Rorty's revaluation, coming as it does as a result of his despair with philosophy. This is the source of my second problem with Rorty with regard to a conception of how literature might be philosophical. For pragmatists, literature is not valued in and for itself; it is valued because it does not make the claims to truths that characterize philosophical writing. In other words, the revaluation of literature is a consequence of pragmatism.

From the point of view of the aesthete, this fact suggests more parallels between Rorty's attitude towards literature and Plato's. For both of them, their attitude to truth, or opinion about what philosophy can do, determines the attitude which each will adopt towards literature. For Rorty, it is the special relation which philosophers claim their study has to truth which makes philosophy both impossible and unnecessary. Clearly this belief puts Rorty at odds with much of the philosophical establishment. But he has in common with them the view that whatever philosophical conclusions he comes to must determine his understanding of literature. I resist the notion that answers to the question "how can literature be philosophical" may be expressed in terms of whether or not literary texts conform to my criteria of truth. I want to rather insist that my attitude towards literature is not predetermined, and that part of what it means to say that literature is philosophical is that literature can argue for philosophical positions which may differ from the ones which I already have. This attitude distinguishes me from the many analytic philosophers who have chosen to translate the question 'how can literature be philosophical' to the question 'how can there be truth in fiction?'.<sup>19</sup> For precisely the same reason, it also distinguishes me from those analytic philosophers who translate the question 'how can literature be philosophical' into 'what role does my emotional response to literature play in cognition?'.<sup>20</sup> The distinction allows me greater flexibility of response to the question, since I do not need to limit myself to arguing that only those literary texts which conform to a particular conception of truth, or of emotion, count as philosophical. It also offers a greater philosophical significance to literature, since I argue that literature itself is able to contemplate the philosophical problem of what constitutes truth, or of what role emotion plays in cognition.

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<sup>19</sup> For a recent example of such an approach, see Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). A useful survey of the analytic tradition's emphasis on truth in relation to this question may be found in Peter J. McCormick, *Fictions, Philosophies and the Problems of Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 82-86.



I have argued that the dissolution of the boundaries between philosophy and literature effected by Rorty is complicit with the Platonic value system because it conceives literature as a threat to philosophy, and its revaluation as merely a consequence of pragmatism.<sup>21</sup> Traditional analytic philosophers have also seen deconstruction, and particularly the work of Jacques Derrida, as a threat to their best endeavours.<sup>22</sup> However, Derridean deconstruction has quite separate implications for my study. Although deconstruction does not offer an explicit answer to the question of how it is possible for literature to be philosophical, the way in which its practitioners have sought to subject texts from either tradition to similar analysis has been highly instructive, since it offers a way of approaching texts outwith any traditions in which they may have been placed.<sup>23</sup> One consequence of this practice is that the proposal to answer the question “how can literature be philosophical” by for example, looking for formalist answers, is a mistake. There are no formal qualities to be found in literature which may not be similarly found in philosophy.

My ambition of rereading and rewriting the Platonic value system in order to expose, explore, and explode its assumptions and conditions is, perhaps, coincident with a deconstructionist methodology. It seems to echo, for example, de Man’s understanding of deconstruction as something which

always has for its target to reveal the existence of hidden articulations and fragmentations within assumedly monadic totalities.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the discussion of philosophical questions which I excavate from novels may be seen in terms of sets of ‘hidden articulations’. The atmosphere and example of deconstruction, then, is something of which I avail myself, an important supplementary conception of my method.

More specifically, the project of Derridean deconstruction, and its effect on traditional philosophy, may be said to have had some influence on this thesis. Its triumph seems to me to consist in a certain successful philosophical writing about literature, a writing which is

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<sup>20</sup> For an exploration of the difficulties involved in making assumptions related to philosophical accounts of emotional experiences of literature, see Jenefer Robinson, ‘L’Éducation Sentimental’, in *Art and its Messages*, ed. by Stephen Davies (Philadelphia PA: Penn State University Press, 1997) pp. 34-48.

<sup>21</sup> In arguing this, I perpetuate a pattern set up by Rorty in the following remark; ‘One may say of Heidegger what he himself says of Nietzsche: misled by a superficial understanding of the Platonic ideas, he tried to replace them, but only translated Platonism into a newer jargon’; ‘Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey’, in *Consequences*, pp. 37-59 (p. 54). In the terms of my argument, I apply this same criticism in turn to Rorty’s attempt to overturn the Platonic conception of philosophy and literature.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Mary Warnock, *Imagination and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Christopher Norris, *The Deconstructive Turn: Essays In the Rhetoric of Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 249.

founded upon loyalty to, and careful reading of the literary text. Moreover, such a perspective, separate as it is from the tradition in philosophy, need not be defensive about the role of literature, need not exclude the possibility that literature may be found to offer more than is commonly supposed to philosophy. As a result, there is no reason at all for texts which participate in Derridean deconstruction to limit literature's role to that of examples for philosophers' arguments. Derrida makes this point explicitly, saying that

poetry and literature provide or facilitate "phenomenological" access to what makes of a thesis a *thesis as such*.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast to Rorty, Derrida seems to consider literature's role in the presentation, and therefore the production, of arguments, or theses, to be crucial. Moreover, Derrida specifically acknowledges the historical contiguity of deconstruction and feminism ('That Strange Institution', pp. 57-58). For these reasons alone it might seem that the most efficient way to complete the terms of my thesis, that is, to successfully answer the philosophical question how is it possible that literature can be philosophical, would be to adhere absolutely to Derridean deconstruction, and to confine myself to a development of this thinker's train of thoughts.

However, I do not choose this course. I have so far highlighted features of Derrida's approach to literary texts which I deem positive in relation to my project. There are negative ones too, even in the same article. Derrida feels free to assert that his treatment of literature does not come from a phenomenological response to the arguments of literary texts, particularly novels. He says

I must confess that deep down I have probably never drawn great enjoyment from reading novels, for example, beyond the pleasure taken in analyzing the play of writing, or else certain naive movements of identification. I like a certain practice of fiction, the intrusion of an effective simulacrum or of disorder into philosophical writing, for example, but telling or inventing stories is something that deep down (or rather on the surface!) does not interest me particularly. (pp. 39-40)

For me, the need to theoretically connect philosophy and literature is a way of explaining, of making sense of a feeling, often a specifically phenomenological contribution, that literature has had upon my understanding of the world and its structures. Derrida's contrasting response serves to relate his project to that of other, mainstream, even analytic philosophers who attempt to absorb literature as a philosophical project. This is consistent with Derrida's description of his turn from literature to philosophy, which is also described as a move beyond literature;

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, ' "This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview With Jacques Derrida', trans. By Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75 (p. 46).

I had a presentiment that there could sometimes be an innocence or an irresponsibility, or even an impotence, in literature [...] I quickly got interested in a form of literature which bore a question *about* literature, or else a philosophical type of activity which interrogated the relationship between speech and writing. (p. 39)

Even here, then, there are echoes of the Platonic value system which associates feminine gender stereotypic features with literature, in contrast to an active philosophy which is capable of practising interrogation. In many ways, then, Derrida shares an attitude towards literature with many other philosophers, and although he undoubtedly strives to demonstrate the philosophical contribution of literature, he does not do this as a specific challenge to the analytic Platonic tradition as regards the relationship between philosophy and literature as I have described it, but rather he does this as a way of developing his own interest in the question of what writing consists in. Although an admirable and interesting project, it is quite distinct from mine here, as Derrida's confessions of his feelings about literature reveal.

Ironically, my qualms with regard to both analytic appropriations of literary forms and the pragmatist siding with literature against philosophy reflect similar concerns which Julia Kristeva has about Derrida *et al.* Kristeva distinguishes between rhetoricians and writers, arguing that the former 'does not invent a language', but rather deliberately makes use of the imaginative capacity of discourse;

he seduces it in the Latin sense of the verb - he "leads it astray" [...] This is indeed what is happening to the discourse of contemporary philosophers, in France particularly, when, hemmed in by the breakthroughs in social sciences on the one hand, and social upheavals on the other, the philosopher begins performing literary tricks, thus arrogating to himself a power over imaginations.<sup>26</sup>

This patriarchal arrogation may be explained, I have argued, by the way in which such philosophers, in many different places, may be said to collude with the Platonic claims.

Attempts to resolve the ancient quarrel by asserting the ability of philosophers to appropriate literary forms is problematic, and does not contribute helpfully to the question of how it is possible that literature can be philosophical. In the next section I will shift the camera, to look at the attitude of literature to couplings with philosophy.

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<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'From One Identity To An Other', in *Desire In Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 124-147 (pp. 138-139).

## 2. LITERATURE

The possibility that one can learn from a novel is perhaps more tempting for literary artists than it is for philosophers. Indeed, at first glance, it seems that literature has nothing to lose and much to gain by such a connection. Accordingly, the interdisciplinary journal 'Philosophy and Literature' is to be found in the literature section of the library, and much of the philosophy which is receptive to literature may be found in the literary sections as well as (and sometimes instead of) the philosophy sections of both libraries and bookshops.

University literature departments have been happy to look at those philosophies/ers rejected by their philosophical counterparts. It may be observed that the notion that literature is more keen to be close to philosophy than *vice versa*, fits in perfectly with Plato's model which posits literature as a seducer of philosophy, initiating relations and insisting on couplings.

In fact literature has been open to interdisciplinary relationships of all kinds, perhaps for no other reason than because it is a study of writing, and writing may be said to be an issue for most academic subjects. Yet philosophy does present a special relationship, just because the questions it poses seem so relevant to the analysis of the significance of texts. Core questions faced by literary critics have often brought them close to consideration of philosophical issues connected with the reading as well as the writing experience, and the proximity of philosophy to many kinds of literary criticism is so wide ranging that it cannot possibly be given detailed consideration here.

Instead, I want to outline a general attitude of the literary establishment which assumes that literature is philosophical, and which as a result concerns itself primarily with debating the different ways in which this is the case. Much twentieth-century criticism has been characteristically open to and discursive with the philosophy which it touches upon. And yet theorists stop short of making explicit the reason for this relevance of philosophical matters to the world of literature. Artists also display an assumption that literature "just is" philosophical. My suggestion is that this attitude is part of the heritage set in place by the Romantic movement in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, which saw poets like Coleridge and Keats producing works which assert their own philosophical significance without explanation or exegesis. That this critical assumption (that is, one made at the level of theory), continues to be made can be shown with reference towards a contemporary reading of Romantic literary theory and practice, which I take to be symptomatic of the Romanticist assumption of philosophy evident throughout contemporary literary theory.

In a difficult and complex text, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argue that in particular, early German romanticism may be said to constitute a response to a philosophical '*question of literature*';<sup>27</sup>

although it is not entirely or simply philosophical, romanticism is rigorously comprehensible (or even accessible) only on a philosophical basis, in its proper and in fact unique (in other words, entirely new) articulation with the philosophical. (p. 29, authors' italics)

Since this literary approach was historically facilitated by Kant, the focus of romanticism may be regarded as something bequeathed from Kant. This gift, according to the authors, 'was the crisis of the question of the subject'. Moreover, romanticism may be said to provide a response to this question;

once the idea of mankind itself is "premised" - which obviously means that man as such is premised - it goes without saying that an at least implicit answer is given to the question: *What is man?* As is well known, Kant said that philosophy is forever incapable of answering this question. (p. 34, authors' italics).

In this way, not only is philosophy assumed by literature, but the inadequacies of philosophy are taken to be 'well known'. Again;

there is nothing in philosophy [...] that can provide the subject with access to itself. But on the other hand, there is this (traditional) religious figure of the mediator [...] incarnated in the artist. (p. 67).

The artist then becomes the focus for the philosophical understanding of romanticism, overcoming the philosophical crisis of the subject, and knowingly inspiring devotion (p. 70). Literature of early romanticism in this way provides its own theory of itself, becoming hermeneutically independent of philosophy and yet capable of answering the philosophical questions posed by itself in its position as an art. This achievement of progressive self referentiality is captured in the notion of the literary absolute.

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe demonstrate that romanticism conceives literature as the culmination of a philosophical culture. Their work may not be defined simply or entirely as an historical analysis, for two connected reasons. First of all, the two authors persistently refuse to distinguish between their own perspectives and those of the Romantics as expressed in the texts they adopt for analysis. Their insistence on sharing the perspective of the authors whose positions they characterize may be seen in the language used to describe such positions, which is familiar and assuming. The assertions above that philosophical notions are 'well known' and 'obvious' are typical. The effect of this style is to create an

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<sup>27</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 13, author's italics. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.



impressionistic conception of philosophy which allows the authors to remain parasitic upon (traditional) notions of the philosophical whilst at the same time challenging such notions. I will say more about this in a moment.

Another reason why this work may not be seen as simply or entirely historical is that the notion of literature proposed by romanticism is taken to provide a grounding for late-twentieth-century understandings of literature; the romantics in this way may be said to conceive our notion of literature. There are interesting implications of this position for my work. The way in which contemporary notions of literature are bound up with those of the romantic era, the confusion of those two perspectives, and the way in which the authors suggest that our contemporary philosophical sense of literature can be traced back to the romantic era, may be extended for my purposes to indicate that if there are senses in which literature is often understood to be philosophical by literary critics, these may be significantly influenced by the proposals of romanticism. It would seem that the authors wish to make a proposal which is diametrically opposed to that of Richard Rorty; where Rorty wants to argue that philosophy is a literary genre, these two thinkers present the thesis that literature is a philosophical genre.

However, having proposed this reading of the Jena Romantics, the authors go on to undercut their own thesis, by insisting that;

the identity of philosophy with literature and of literature with philosophy [...] never takes place.

The thesis that literature is a philosophical genre is proposed only to be challenged.

Moreover, the organic promise of an holistic, unified theory and practice cannot be fulfilled by the texts adopted by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe for analysis, since

the identity of literature with itself and philosophy with itself are absent as well.

In other words, the

auto-manifestation of literature ought to be considered as a *neutral* manifestation, or a *negative [pas]* of manifestation [...] such a manifestation is not a manifestation, not in any of the senses that philosophy can confer on this word. (p. 123)

On the one hand, the notion of literature as inscribed by the Jena Romantics is essentially and fundamentally philosophical, and to be understood on philosophical terms. Moreover, and in a specific sense, the Romantic conception of literature exceeds philosophy in that it is able to approach the question of the subject, through the figure of the artist, as philosophy cannot do. Literature, then, is defined philosophically, and literary authors can attain to the philosophical simply by being located as artistic textual source. Against this, philosophy

cannot be assumed by literature, and the relationship between the two is unresolved in terms of identity, because each is always both less and more than the other. In other words, despite an essential philosophical 'articulation' of literature, the language of philosophy is inadequate for literature.

Having it both ways allows the authors to adopt an association of literature and philosophy, but at the same time retreat from any useful explanation of how the association places each side of the equation. So, whilst literature's status is guaranteed by this association, critics can continue to assume that notion of the other side which suits their purposes. Specifically, in this instance, philosophy can be that which gives to literature the theme of the thinking (artistic) subject, but at the same time it can be that which fails to confer adequate sense to terms such as 'manifestation'.

This is the romanticist thesis which I take to be symptomatic of the contemporary literary theoretical climate. It consumes philosophical issues, and assumes philosophical status for literature, but at the same time rejects the possibility of articulation; of making a sense of the relationship which is said to exist between philosophy and literature.

The romanticist thesis of the possibility of philosophical literature has been most influential, in terms of studies which aim to show how it is that literature can be philosophical. This is my concern here, and there are two aspects of this influence which I wish to draw out. The first is in the focus on the Romantic notion of the philosopher artist as an esoteric King Midas, the touch of whose pen turns every work to philosophy. In this case, the answer to how a literary text may be regarded as philosophical is by its being written by a particular author.<sup>28</sup> The second way in which the thesis has been influential is in a more general sense of a romanticizing of the literature in order to make it philosophical.<sup>29</sup> Here, philosophical status is conferred on a text as a badge of honour, crediting the movement from reification to abstraction.

Both of these features are exemplified in the work of Stanley Cavell, who erects an elite canon of literary authors to whom he designates philosophical status, in an idiosyncratic style

<sup>28</sup> Authors with a biographical connection to institutional philosophy regularly have their texts designated philosophical. See for example Merle Williams, *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Whilst James was connected fraternally to philosophy, Iris Murdoch sustains a professional philosophical connection, having begun her writing career as a philosophy don. Her writings have also proved tempting for philosophers' philosophical interpretations. Peter Lamarque in particular seems to focus on Murdoch for his philosophical readings of literature, as for example throughout his *Fictional Points of View* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> This means that many regressive philosophical modes may be invoked in the name of philosophical literary criticism. See for example Konstantin Kolenda, *Philosophical Literature: Metaphysical Darkness and Ethical Light* (London: MacMillan, 1982).

which I take to be a romanticizing of the issues.<sup>30</sup> Cavell sums up his own project as follows;

I have argued [...] over the years for Emerson's and Thoreau's characters of mind as philosophical, for their quality of intellect as equal to an inheritance of philosophy [...] and for their position, still early by comparison with European time, as all but uniquely open to a responsiveness to both the German and English traditions of philosophy, to that spiritual rift in the Western philosophical mind.<sup>31</sup>

Emerson and Thoreau are presented in the tradition of the Romantic philosopher artist, whose genius and mastery of their discipline is such that their work may count as philosophical, in its most inspiring, dramatic sense.<sup>32</sup>

I have two main problems with this kind of response to the problem of the possibility of philosophical literature. Perhaps most importantly, concentration on the philosopher artist represents a regression to the idea that literary works can be philosophical when they are written by a philosopher taking the Socratic stance. The influence of this notion is, I have argued, unfortunate, since it indicates collusion with the Platonic value system, and perpetuation of the notion that there are certain special people, or philosopher artists, who are able to overcome the distinction between philosophy and literature. In conjunction with a patriarchal value system such as Plato's, this evocation of a master of their discipline has the effect of perpetuating dichotomous bias. As such, I reject those works of literary criticism which have been influenced in this vein, producing texts which focus on the defence of the notion that literature is philosophical when it is written by someone who attains to the level of philosopher.

Secondly, Cavell adopts the romanticist impressionistic conception of philosophy, which on the one hand assumes that literature is **essentially** philosophical; that literature's capacity for *Darstellung* makes literary writing a philosophical act. This suggests that all literature is inherently philosophical; to say that something is literature is at the same time to say that it is philosophical. In answer to the question "how can literature be philosophical?" this posits an identity relation; it says that literature just is philosophical. On the other hand the romantic impressionistic conception of philosophy refuses to delineate the sense in which literature is philosophical because the language of philosophy does not allow for such a delineation; only

<sup>30</sup> Rorty makes a similar critique of Cavell for different purposes. See Richard Rorty, 'Cavell On Skepticism', in *Consequences*, pp. 176-190, where parenthetical reference is made to just 'one of Cavell's lists of heroes', and Cavell's strategy is summed by Rorty thus;

'usually we Anglo-Americans try to deromanticize our own tradition by showing that it has some good arguments. Cavell tries to romanticize our own tradition by showing that it does not' (p. 183).

<sup>31</sup> Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 46.

<sup>32</sup> These two authors do not exhaust Cavell's canon. A notable exception which nevertheless fulfils the pattern which I identify is his *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).



literature, a literature which has exceeded a necessarily both separate and inadequate philosophy, can suffice.

As a result of such assumptive reasoning, literary critics may be more likely to deal with the question of which types of philosophy may be found in which type of literature, than to deal with that which I have identified as my core question. An example of this is apparent when the debate as to the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is seen to turn on whether or not the texts to which either labels apply may be said to deal with epistemological or ontological questions. Brian McHale argues that where modernism may be said to ask epistemological questions, postmodernism asks ontological ones.<sup>33</sup> Larry McCaffrey suggests the reverse.<sup>34</sup> In spite of their disagreements, these critics share an assumption that literature just is philosophical, and that the only issue is which kind of philosophy may be found there. A similar, but clearer assertion of this assumption may be found in the words of Angela Carter, who, in what appears to be an absolute contradiction of Priest's position, remarks that 'for me, a narrative is an argument stated in fictional terms'.<sup>35</sup>

Although Carter here claims the opposite view to Priest's, Plato's and Rorty's, her comment still amounts to the same dismissal of the issue. By relativizing her opinion, she abdicates responsibility for providing justification for her position that fictional narratives count as arguments, in spite of the controversial nature of this position. In the cases of Gaarder and Sartre, the failure to provide methodological justification for bringing philosophy and literature together was often explained by the way in which literary connections seemed to distinguish philosophers from their discipline. Here there is rather an assumption on the part of literature that philosophy always has been and always will be a factor in their study.

In some sense, this assumption is understandable. To serious readers of literature, it is clear that reading affects one's understanding of life. Barbara Christian puts this point most forcefully, when she says

For me, literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/ know *is*. It is an affirmation that sensuality is intelligence, that sensual language is language that makes sense.<sup>36</sup>

Literature often seems to have a power to speak to readers in a way that no other form of written information can. It speaks to us about our lives, our relationships with other people,

<sup>33</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> Larry McCaffrey, *The Metafictional Muse: The Work of Robert Coover, Donald Barthes, and William H. Gass* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982).

<sup>35</sup> Angela Carter, 'Preface' to *Come Unto These Yellow Sands* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), pp. 7-13 (p. 7).

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Christian, 'The Race For Theory', *Feminist Studies*, 14:1 (1988), 67-79 (pp. 77-78, author's italics).

and the world around us. In addition, literature lovers may assume that all others are aware of this incredible power and influence which novels have, and so that it does not need to be defended. Literature can simply revel in its own banishment. My suggestion here is that in identifying others' perspectives with our own, the assumption that literature just is philosophical is narrow minded; in refusing to justify itself, it is dogmatic.

In addition, the assumption that literature is philosophical effectively breaks off communication with the other partner, communication which might be crucial for the purposes of ultimate conciliation. It leaves philosophers to think negatively of the combination, effectively saying that literature need not and cannot be considered to provide such a justification because that is the job of philosophy. Again, the absence of a theory suggests to philosophers that firstly there cannot be one, and secondly, that if there were one, it could only be proposed in a philosophical form. Yet in my terms, this is the absolute antithesis of the idea that literature can be philosophical, and can once more be understood as the effect of the shadow of the Platonic value system.

So assuming that literature just is philosophical; that readers can learn from literature "because we do", is to make a mistake which allows philosophers to continue to ignore literature. It also leaves the assumption to be regarded as neither here nor there. In other words, if the position is stated and not proved, it is possible that literary critics and authors may fail to see any point in a potential of literature to be philosophical. Indeed, some dissenters react with horror to the suggestion that the things that literature says may be taken as serious proposals.

I take Milan Kundera's arguments to be representative of this view. He frames his proposals as a response to the fatwa declared by the Iranian government against Salman Rushdie in 1989, and takes this transgression of freedom of speech and human rights as an example of what happens when readers of literature make the mistake of 'taking it all so seriously'.<sup>37</sup> The idea of seriousness is crucial to his argument, and once more recalls connections with Searle's characterization of literary language as nonserious. Kundera is not suggesting that literature is unimportant, but he does want to say that its texts are primarily of entertainment value, unrelated to real people and the world in which they live.

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<sup>37</sup> Milan Kundera, 'The Enigma of Old Booby Traps', *Guardian*, 16 September 1995, p. 29. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

I suggest that Kundera here confuses negative critiques with the recognition of literature's philosophical contribution. When people are offended by, or object to something which they think a literary work is saying, they only regard the text as philosophical insofar as they wish to respond with an argument which shows the defects of the literary argument. When a religious group decide to burn effigies of an author, and threaten that author's life, they are engaging in a different activity altogether. The one need not lead to the latter; in fact I suggest that if taken seriously, philosophical criticism never could lead to the latter.

For now it is enough to have noted that Kundera accepts and perpetuates Plato's position on the relationship between philosophy and literature. For although Kundera manages to expose the gap of exegesis; or, as he puts it;

Europe's incapacity to defend and explain (explain patiently to itself and to others) that most European of arts, the art of the novel, (p. 29)

his conception of such a defence would be almost entirely negative; that novels are not to be taken seriously, that they neither condone nor propose real principles and, most of all, that one may not expect to learn from them. In this way his analysis is consistent with the idea that literature is diametrically opposed to philosophy, and also that the former is part of the less valued side to the dichotomy. So Kundera also ends up returning to Plato, trivializing literature ironically in an attempt to defend it.

In conclusion, I believe that contributions from literature on this issue have, like those from philosophy, fitted in neatly with Plato's position as expressed in the *Republic*. This is notably true of those critics who have attempted to answer the question of how literature can be philosophical by focusing on a single author. They have spoken from within the restrictive tradition, without realizing it. As a result, attempts to defend literature's philosophical potential have only served once again to divide the two fields, and moreover, have been blamed by at least one critic for contributing to the downfall of European literature as a whole. The answer to my question is not to be found in this section.

I have spent some time criticizing the idea that literature may be assumed to be philosophical, without showing it. In the next section I want to look at the ways in which certain readers of philosophy and literature have dealt explicitly with the question.

### 3. HOW CAN LITERATURE BE PHILOSOPHICAL?

In the previous two sections I looked at ways in which the mainstreams of analytic philosophy and literature have regarded their relationship with each other. I claimed that no successful analyses have been constructed, and that Plato's word on the matter still functions as authoritative. In this section, I move on to look at those (in the main analytic philosophers, but also some literary theorists) who have presented direct and explicit responses to the issue of how it is possible to learn from a novel. The claim that literature can be shown to be philosophical may have different interpretations, involving different notions of what it means for literature to be philosophical.

I have already rejected the single author approach as inadequate and undesirable. At this stage I want to identify and discard two more interpretations of the question of how literature can be philosophical which I regard as being weak claims. There is a very general view of philosophy and the philosophical which is taken to refer to a perspective on something called "the human condition", and the claim that literature can be philosophical in the sense that it has such an outlook may be said to constitute a weak claim. Stein Haugom Olsen's suggestion that literature which contains 'perennial thematic concepts' may be considered philosophical because of these features would be a typical case of such a weak claim.<sup>38</sup> It is an evaluative claim, which says that literature which discusses the issues which I think of as important, succeeds in being philosophical.

To use the label philosophical in this way seems rather like awarding rosettes to healthy cattle at a country fair; it is to congratulate literary artists for being able to approach the problems of a hallowed enclave. Gender associations of philosophy and literature translate this into a pat on the back for women as they manage to refer loosely and superficially to the discussions men have long been having deeply and meaningfully. This claim is not useful for my purposes.

Another weak interpretation of the notion that literature can be shown to be philosophical argues that literature can refer to and depict canonical philosophers and their ideas. This is the sense in which literature may be seen as illustrative of particular philosophical ideas; it depicts them in novel form. For example, Lawrence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* is often

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<sup>38</sup> See Stein Haugom Olsen, 'Thematic Concepts: Where Philosophy Meets Literature', in *The End of Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 176-195 (p. 185).

thought to exemplify certain strands of eighteenth-century Empiricist doctrine.<sup>39</sup> The level of exemplification or illustration of philosophy is often deemed an appropriate one for literature, as Socrates himself conceded. The weakness of this claim consists in its allowing literature to be dependent upon philosophy, and thus preserving the notion of philosophy as the master discipline. This problem would not be overcome even if one were to discover illustrations or examinations of non-traditional philosophers in novels. Although it might be tempting to find fictional works which demonstrate the philosophical ideas of philosophers who are sympathetic to the possibilities of literature, I have chosen to avoid such an approach, because it seems to me to lapse into complicity with the Platonic system, and so to perpetuate the weaknesses of that system for analyses of the relationship between philosophy and literature.<sup>40</sup>

Neither of these claims will be discussed further here, since I wish to uphold a stronger interpretation of the notion that literature can be shown to be philosophical. This is the claim that literature is philosophical in that it is able seriously to propose ideas and arguments which enable readers to read and think more about themselves and the world in which we live.

Where the weaker claims have been accepted by a majority of literary critics, and many philosophers, support for the stronger claim has been less common. Yet it has had some support of varying form and utility. I now wish to examine the ways in which the stronger claim has been defended, and point out the advantages and limitations of these theories, before going on to make clear my point of departure from them. As in the previous two sections, my aim is not to provide an exhaustive history of such discussions, but rather to refer to a pattern which I see in the work and will try to represent in order to break away from it.

I want to draw out two different strands here, based upon where defenders of the strongest claim draw their boundaries. Some theorists place limits on the type of philosophy which they find in literature, and some place limits upon those types of literature in which they find it.

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<sup>39</sup> For an uncommonly sophisticated analysis of this type see Bernard Harrison, 'Sterne and Sentimentalism' in *Commitment In Reflection: Essays In Literature and Moral Philosophy*, ed. by Leona Toker (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), pp. 63-100.

<sup>40</sup> This is not to say that I intend deliberately to ignore mentions of philosophers when they occur in the literature which I will examine. The point is more that I wish to diminish the significance of such considerations for the purposes of exploring how it might be possible for literature to be philosophical. See Chapter Four, p. 228.

Those who choose to place limits on the type of philosophy they will find in literature have often tended to focus on ethics. An early and full defence of the importance of the relationship between the two is to be found in R. W. Beardsmore's 1971 monograph *Art and Morality*, whose thesis is that contrary to the views of Tolstoy, the function of art is not to teach ethics, but that contrary to the views of Wilde, art can contribute to our sense of morality. Beardsmore stakes a claim to the ground between these standpoints, arguing that art offers

a new conception of some aspect of our lives, a new idea of what it makes sense to say about war or love or hypocrisy, and thus a new idea of the significance which they may have for us.<sup>41</sup>

Beardsmore's argument applies to all art, but recently the focus has come to rest more and more upon literary art. Literary critics like F. R. Leavis had already established a grounding for such analysis, by founding a criticism upon the conviction that certain works of literature can improve one's moral sensibility.<sup>42</sup> Leavisite humanist criticism has declined in influence in literature departments in recent decades, but during the past decade a growing army of philosophers have proved keen to develop a defence of the idea that literature may be able to offer insights into moral philosophy.<sup>43</sup>

An example of a philosopher who has addressed the question of how it is possible to learn from a novel in these terms is Martha Nussbaum, whose collection of papers entitled *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* has been both popular and influential. Nussbaum argues that some novels are in fact more properly considered to be works of moral philosophy, since they present a moral sensibility, and practice moral reasoning, in ways which may be impossible for works of traditional philosophy. All of the methodological arguments produced by Nussbaum are geared towards the possibility that moral philosophy, and no other type, may be found in literature. Indeed, much of this work seems uncomfortably close to a depiction of the elitist self-importance of the "well read"; it bears the suggestion that reading the works of certain (usually canonical) authors is likely to make one a better person, which slides easily into the assumption that the kind of people who have read such works are *prima facie* superior to those who have not. One of the problems with focusing upon moral philosophy, then, as so many theorists seem to do, is that it retains the difficulties associated with Leavisite criticism.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> R. W. Beardsmore, *Art and Morality* (London: MacMillan, 1971), p. 75.

<sup>42</sup> F. R. Leavis, *The Living Principle: 'English' as a Discipline of Thought* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975).

<sup>43</sup> For an interesting contemporary survey of the interdisciplinary relationships between literature and ethics see Steven Connor, 'Honour Bound', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 January 1996, pp. 24-26.

<sup>44</sup> For a critique of the elitist assumptions of Leavisite criticism see Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), pp. 252-264.



Nussbaum in particular also appears to dilute the strength of her claim in response to criticism from the philosophers keen to preserve the tradition in ethics. I think that she is pushed into this position by the concession which she allows to Wollheim,<sup>45</sup> when she says that

even to begin [seeing philosophy in literature], we need a type of philosophical commentary.<sup>46</sup>

I think that the idea of a necessary philosophical commentary reduces philosophical literature to the status of mere examples, thus invoking the weaker claim that literature can be shown to be philosophical in the sense of illustrating the ideas of “real” philosophers. Yet Nussbaum has, I think rightly, already noted the inadequacy of philosophical examples in comparison to the freedom and depth offered by novels (p. 47). Furthermore, I have already suggested that to treat novels as illustrations of the substantive claims made by philosophy is a mistake, the avoidance of which is, I think, important.

Ironically enough, Leavis had already warned of the danger posed by philosophical interventions. In particular, he takes issue with the assumption of a colleague that ‘value-judgements in literary criticism are to be justified by philosophical analysis’, observing that such an assumption

never escapes from the spectral presence and potency even where it isn’t explicit or conscious.<sup>47</sup>

As I have observed previously, analyses which take literature to illustrate points made by philosophers perpetuate the Platonic value system, since under its ‘spectral presence’, literature becomes unnecessary decoration for the necessary and serious discussions of the male philosopher. This is a trap which even comparing philosophical texts to literary ones risks, and so cannot be ignored.

I reject then, the notion of a necessary philosophical commentary. Philosophical literature must be taken seriously as philosophical in its own right. Nussbaum cannot do this, in my opinion, because her investment in classicism means that she always retains a bias towards philosophy and its traditional form.<sup>48</sup> For example, in her now infamous article in the *New*

<sup>45</sup> See Richard Wollheim, ‘Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and the Plausibility of Literature as Moral Philosophy’, *New Literary History*, 15:1 (1983), 185-191.

<sup>46</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays On Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 49. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>47</sup> F. R. Leavis, ‘Mutually Necessary’, *New Universities Quarterly*, 30:2 (1976), 129-151 (p. 132).

<sup>48</sup> For a full analysis of the conflict between Nussbaum’s attitudes to feminist philosophy and philosophical literature see my article ‘Martha Nussbaum and Unreasonable Philosophy’, in *Women Review Philosophy: New Writing By Women In Philosophy*, ed. by Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Press, 1996), pp. 85-101.



*York Review of Books* Nussbaum objects to certain feminist philosophy on the grounds that it fails to come up to the philosophical standard of being 'straightforwardly presented [...] with appropriately rigorous analysis'.<sup>49</sup> If this is to be a standard of philosophical thinking, then literature can never hope to count as philosophical. Nussbaum's view of feminist philosophy as a threat to the tradition of rigorous, rationalist argument, is acutely reminiscent of Plato's perspective with regard to literature. Despite her claims to the contrary, Nussbaum fails to value literary features as philosophical.

Yet Nussbaum succeeds in establishing an important principle which anyone interested in a more general defence of the stronger claim might usefully adopt. This principle is the idea that novels have to be shown to be philosophical; the ways in which they work philosophically must be explored and analysed as part of their identification as philosophical. This is a crucial aspect of my thesis, and as such textual exploration and analysis will provide the bulk of it. However, in order to avoid Nussbaum's errors, throughout the course of this exploration, I will resist the temptation to relate particular philosophical interpretations of literature to the work of traditional philosophers, except where this work can be used to clarify philosophical arguments of the literary texts. In this way I hope to ensure that it will not be my commentary which makes the texts I focus upon philosophical. This is an important consequence of my insistence on representative philosophical interpretations. My textual analyses will outline a possibility of textual interpretation; they will not themselves constitute that possibility.

So much for trying to delimit the kind of philosophy which one might find in literature. The second type of analysis I would like to consider is to be found in the work of those theorists who suggest that there is a particular type of literature which may be able to present and develop philosophical notions. The division of literature into types constitutes genre criticism, which is periodically vilified as a critical method.<sup>50</sup> However, using genre criticism as a strategy for defending the philosophical status of literature is appealing because it has its origins in Aristotle who argues in *The Poetics* against Plato that literature has an important specifically philosophical role to play in the world.

This type of methodological justification of philosophical literature amounts to writers using a whole genre in the service of the strong claim that literature may be philosophical because

<sup>49</sup> Martha Nussbaum, 'Feminists and Philosophy', *New York Review of Books*, 41:17 (1994), 59-63 (p. 62).

<sup>50</sup> For strongly expressed hostility to genre theory see the views of Benedetto Croce, *The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and of the Linguistic In General*, trans. by Colin Lyas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 41; and those of

it enables critics to universalize the philosophical elements which they find in particular texts, by virtue of their belonging to a genre. In this way the texts may be seen as representatively philosophical. In other words, the close textual analysis which I have said is essential to the issue, may be employed in conjunction with the extension which is necessary if we are to provide an adequate theory of how literature, and not just one particular example of literature, may be philosophical.

Examples of those theories which have claimed that particular genres may be seen as philosophical are Tilghman's analysis of nonsense literature as philosophical, and Nicholas Smith and Fred Miller's philosophical interpretations of science fiction literature.

Both of these theories fit easily into the Platonic system, and the associated perspective on gender. In particular, they follow closely the second and fourth claims. The second claim is that which aligns literature with irrational non-theory. Tilghman speaks of an accepted genre of nonsense literature as work which has 'made-up words, silly situations, and unlikely juxtapositions'<sup>51</sup>. Tilghman warns us that the view that he has in mind 'however, is rather different' (p. 257). The difference is made by the author's transformative effect upon the genre, or, specifically the way in which

Marcel Aym   is exploiting - deliberately - exactly the same kind of nonsense that Wittgenstein believes is the very stuff of philosophical theory (p. 260).

This is consistent with the fourth Platonic claim, that literature may be manipulated by the philosopher, in order to gain status. By becoming philosophical in this way, nonsense literature acquires both seriousness and utility. Sexist associations of women with the irrational are well documented, and it is easy to see how Tilghman's theory preserves a value system which is translatable into gender terms, and so shares the cultural assumptions of gender relations in and as the relationship between philosophy and literature. Typically, that which is associated with men may be taken seriously, and that which is associated with women may be trivialized, until, that is, it is brought into contact with a male philosophy.

Similarly, Smith and Miller focus on science fiction, arguing that its speculative nature makes this literature inherently philosophical, by which they mean that it is open to manipulation by philosophers. Smith and Miller also express their view of the relationship between philosophy and literature in terms of how the one is put to use by the other; 'science

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Maurice Blanchot, as translated in Tzvetan Todorov's article, 'The Origin of Genres', *New Literary History*, 8:1 (1976), 159-170 (pp. 159-160).

fiction' they say, 'is the handmaid of philosophy'.<sup>52</sup> This remark not only participates in the explicit genderization of the relationship between philosophy and literature, but also invokes cultural assumptions about male and female relationships; in particular, that the male dominates the passive female.

As a result, both Smith and Miller, and Tilghman, may be said to rely on the romantic notion of the philosopher artist. Both of the genres, nonsense and science fiction literature, are traditionally male dominated genres, which is reflected in the fact that the subjects of their analyses are predominantly, and in Tilghman's case, exclusively, male. The suggestion is that male writers, like Socrates, have the freedom to be a philosopher artist, acting on and using as a tool, a notion of a female literature.

Once these flaws in analysis are exposed, however, I think that the generic approach may still be useful. The reasons for my thinking this may be traced back to Aristotle's defence of the philosophical status of literature. Aristotle offers a contrast between history and literature;

the difference lies in the fact that one speaks of events which have occurred, the other of the sort of events which could occur. It is for this reason that poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars.<sup>53</sup>

It is the specificity of history which makes it unphilosophical, as opposed to the potential universality of literature. There are difficulties with this view. In particular, it falls foul of the criticism of reductivism I made of the literary absolute's identification of literature as essentially philosophical. In addition, the references to universality introduce myriad difficulties, many of which I will explore in the next chapter on autography. However, there is an important advantage in the notion of extended application to theories of literature as philosophical. Aristotle regards the philosophical element of fiction to be that it discusses specificities in order to refer to generalities. In other words, fiction is philosophical because its conceptions are in principle universalizable. I want to make use of this notion structurally; to suggest, in specifying philosophical literary texts, that all fiction texts may have the potential to be viewed in this way.

Another key advantage of employing a structure of genre to demonstrate the possibility of literature being philosophical is that it continues the theme of highlighting structures which

<sup>51</sup> B. R. Tilghman, 'Literature, Philosophy and Nonsense', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 30:3 (1990), 256-265 (p. 256). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>52</sup> Nicholas D. Smith and Fred Miller, 'Introduction: The Philosophical Appeal of Science Fiction', in *Philosophers Look at Science Fiction*, ed. by Nicholas D. Smith (Chicago, OH: Nelson Hall, 1982), pp. 1-19 (p. 4).

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 1987), p. 41.

determine the conditions of the debate. Just as Plato's value system set a hidden agenda for consideration of the question as to how literature can be philosophical, so the system of genre criticism may be said to inscribe a similar agenda. And just as the structures which delineate the relationship between literature and philosophy may be deconstructed, so generic prescriptions can be profitably exposed and explored in an attempt to address the question. Generic criticism, then, has much to offer in terms of structural and thematic contributions to my argument.

Problems which theorists in this section have had in dealing with the ancient quarrel between philosophy and literature, or even in trying to conceive of such a relationship at all, may be located in their - usually unacknowledged - position within the traditions of Western philosophy. Plato's position is a paradigm example of the dichotomous view of the

relationship between philosophy and literature, the former of which is thought to be more valuable than the latter. I have tried to look at different ways in which this assumption that philosophy must be positive, and literature negative, has been perpetuated by philosophers and literary critics, in their proposed answers to the question of how literature might be philosophical.

This is incumbent upon the issue of the power relations between philosophy and literature. For those in the literary world, literature is philosophical to the extent that it has something to say about the world in which we live. This view presents a view of literature as aspiring to, and managing to be successful insofar as it does, relate itself to philosophy. When theorists go further, it is still in terms of the literature being read by a philosopher; being acted upon by philosophers, and having philosophical status conferred on it. Thus most of the theoretical standpoints considered in this section have accepted and perpetuated the Platonic position which sees literature as less valuable than philosophy.

At the same time, Plato's value system sets up certain gender associations which have been echoed explicitly, in for example, the work of Smith and Miller, but also implicitly, in most of the other texts I have discussed. And so, I propose that writing and reading novels as philosophical might work as a feminist strategy. Furthermore, I think that this way of analysing the relationship between philosophy and literature may be the most effective so far. This is because feminist analyses are peculiarly aware of power relationships of the kind which I believe to be active and as yet largely unnoticed in any combination of philosophy and literature. As a result, it is the analysis of structures which will govern my approach to the question of how it is that literature can be philosophical.

## B. Feminism

Feminists often speak of traditions in the academy, in terms of how those traditions exclude and alienate women. Indeed, “traditional” is often conceived in opposition to “feminist” in academic works. Philosophy and literature have both been seen as having patriarchal traditions. Yet the place of feminist criticism in the two disciplines is very different. In this section I want to expose those differences by looking at the significance of feminist thought and theory for philosophy, and the significance of feminist thought and theory for literature. I will generally adopt the position that, whilst mainstream philosophy is still intent on alienating women and their thinking, literary traditions have been to a large extent successfully subverted by women writers. This latter claim will allow me to assert a positive notion of tradition for feminism. Both of these assertions will have fundamental consequences for the structure and aims of my thesis.

### 1. AND PHILOSOPHY

In this section I will refer briefly to the ways in which philosophy excludes women, concentrating on how feminists might deal with such exclusion. I will conclude with the claim that feminisms can make unique and positive contributions to mainstream philosophy, and that feminists can make this contribution by finding a way of engaging with the traditional issues of philosophy without compromising their own perspective.

Philosophy is often considered of all academic disciplines the most hostile to feminism. As Margaret Whitford says;

It is often argued [...] that philosophy is *founded* on the exclusion of women.<sup>54</sup>

This is because philosophy may be identified as distinct from all that is associated with femaleness; for example, with the mind as opposed to the body, with culture as opposed to nature, and with reason as opposed to emotion. Crucially, the misogynistic prejudice of many seminal philosophers has led them to argue that philosophy is about a kind of thinking and way of knowing that women simply cannot attain.<sup>55</sup> How are feminists to respond to

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Whitford, ‘The Feminist Philosopher: A Contradiction In Terms?’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 3:2 (1992), 111-120 (p. 111, author’s italics).

<sup>55</sup> For a wide ranging history of the misogynistic philosophical heritage which feminists face together with a useful selection of commentary by feminist philosophers see Martha Lee Osborne, *Woman In Western Thought* (New York: Random House, 1979).



this? One reaction might be to see philosophy as inextricable from its misogynist foundations, and indeed, some feminists have positioned themselves as feminists in opposition to the philosophical.<sup>56</sup>

Even those feminist theorists who do not place philosophy as a specific target may assume that feminism consists in the denial of philosophy. I take Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson to provide a paradigmatic statement of this position in their essay 'Social Criticism Without Philosophy'. In this article, they assume firstly that the legitimate aims of feminism and postmodernism coincide with the attempt to escape from the confines of philosophy, and secondly that the important issues to examine involve which ways the two approaches can come together to more successfully achieve this common aim. Problems in both areas are cited in terms of a failure to expel philosophy. I focus here upon the claims made on behalf of feminism;

in many cases feminist critics continue tacitly to rely on the sorts of philosophical underpinnings which their own commitments, like those of the postmodernists, ought in principle to rule out.<sup>57</sup>

Philosophy is viewed pejoratively as something which infects feminism with patriarchal foundations. Like Daly, Fraser and Nicholson identify philosophy with its traditions, often throughout the article taking the word to be synonymous with 'foundationalism and essentialism' (p. 20), and ignoring the possibility that there might be a variety of philosophy worth wanting.<sup>58</sup>

I do not see good reasons for these feminist critics' identification of the discipline with its traditional past. If patriarchy operates by perpetuating misogynistic social codes, then feminists must work to expose those codes and produce new ones. Leaving the prejudicial social codes in place is not, I believe, a viable option for feminists. Feminists can engage with philosophy to rewrite it.

For Fraser and Nicholson, philosophy is not something which can be rewritten in this way; it is a fixed notion, defined in opposition to both feminism and postmodernism. The suggestion that philosophy is a fixed notion which, as feminists/ postmodernists we 'ought in principle

<sup>56</sup> See for example Mary Daly, *Gyn/ Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 1979). For a critique of Daly's and other similar positions see Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives On Difference and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 86-89.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson, 'Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter Between Feminism and Postmodernism', in *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, ed. by Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 19-38 (p. 20). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>58</sup> My argument here is similar to that of Linda Alcoff in defence of a particular interpretation of metaphysics, in her article 'Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis In Feminist Theory', *Signs: Journal of Women In Culture and Society*, 13:3 (1988), 405-436 (pp. 428-429).



to rule out' is, as Michèle le Doeuff points out in another context, unrealistic, since 'whether we like it or not, we are within philosophy'.<sup>59</sup> An absolute rejection of philosophy is in this sense, untenable. Moreover, to assume that it is, is to erect a binary opposition of philosophy and not-philosophy. Such dichotomous thinking is a problem for feminists.

Dichotomous conceptual frameworks have been used by many misogynistic thinkers to exclude women from the fields of worship, knowledge and action; they thus have a tradition of patriarchal collaboration. Dichotomies work by close definition and exclusion. They define by limitation, and crucially, the understanding which they offer about concepts consists in this limitation. So, under a dualistic understanding of mind and body, for example, body would be defined in most important senses in terms of what mind was not. Practitioners of dichotomous frameworks have often been felt - by feminists - to needlessly exclude that which they see as other.

My suggestion here is that feminists who want to define philosophy negatively participate in the dualist methodology, shutting philosophical ideas and descriptions off to themselves, seeing this as a declaration of independence. Unfortunately, their reversal of the original dichotomy which valorizes philosophy and relegates that which is not philosophy is not accepted by the rest of the academic world, which still exists content in a patriarchal state, where women and their views are invisible. In this way feminists may effectively exclude themselves, allowing philosophers to continue to construct the world in ways which are ignorant of women's perspectives. Paradoxically, they collude with the patriarchal stereotype which says that women are incapable of the kind of intellectual thought which is called philosophy. This collusion operates in the same way as the philosophical dismissal of literature which happens as a result of gestures of conciliation.

I suggest that abandoning dichotomous thinking is of crucial importance for feminists in philosophy. In this way they will be able to fully explore relationships between things, as well as - and often at the same time as - the things themselves. By incorporating this sense of the power of fluidity I indicate a recognition of recent work in poststructuralist feminism, which indicates that the abandonment of the binary oppositions which make up dichotomous systems offers a path towards a new writing particularly associated with feminist movement in literature.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, some such critics often seem to suggest that this recognition of fluidity

<sup>59</sup> Michèle le Doeuff, 'Women and Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy*, 17 (1977), 2-11 (p. 2).

<sup>60</sup> See for example Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', trans. by Ann Liddle, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Harvester Press, 1981), pp. 90-98.

is a more natural position for women.<sup>61</sup> I avoid such essentialist proposals by arguing that feminists can usefully but consciously adopt it as policy. Further, this policy makes the feminist perspective in philosophy most appropriate for an examination of the relationship between philosophy and literature, since it begins with a premise that is fundamentally critical of Plato's dichotomous value system.

Not all feminists have responded to the philosophical tradition by wanting to exclude themselves from it; rather they have chosen to engage with philosophy. Again, this is a massive area of study, and I cannot possibly hope to outline all aspects of it. Rather, I want to draw a rough sketch of ways in which feminists have structured their engagement, and the effect which this has on my proposed answer to the question of how literature can be philosophical.

The liberal feminist position in philosophy has been fairly consistent with the aim behind Mary Wollstonecraft's reference to Rousseau's social and political philosophy, which she says she wants to 'extend [...] to women'.<sup>62</sup> Liberal feminists take it upon themselves to add women on to the history of philosophy; extending and applying ideas that are already in play, but which tend only to have been applied to men. This works for example in the way that Janet Radcliffe Richards writes an extension of Rawls' theory of social and political philosophy.<sup>63</sup> In this way, liberal feminists seek accommodation within the mainstream of philosophy.

The problem with this attitude is that it retains the biases of the misogynist philosophical tradition, and so even when this tradition is "applied" to women, it can only result in them being seen as inadequate persons, the inadequacy lying in their not being men. For liberal feminists, women can easily involve themselves in the male world of philosophy, so long as they adopt male structures and discourse in that world. I regard this as a parallel argument to that which sees the potential for literature to be philosophical only insofar as it denies its status as literature; the latter is allowed to become, temporarily and conditionally, honorary philosophy, just as liberal feminists seem to seek to be regarded as honorary males. As such, they will be allowed to play the game of philosophy, so long as they agree to follow the rules.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>62</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 103.

<sup>63</sup> Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist: A Philosophical Enquiry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).

I argued that there was little point in regarding literature in this way. One way of expressing this is to say that literary works can never succeed in wearing the mantle of traditional philosophical tracts as well as it has been worn by traditional philosophical tracts themselves. Similarly, I see the accommodating feminism of liberalism as futile because women can never be as good at being men as men are. Both symbols of futility have their roots in the failure to challenge the structures of mainstream philosophy, and this is a failure which this thesis seeks to redress.

There is a more specific problem with the accommodation theory of feminism. As Joanna Hodge has pointed out, it insists that women de-sex themselves in order to practice philosophy, on the understanding that male philosophers have always done this.<sup>64</sup> And yet of course this latter is not true; it is merely a myth of patriarchal philosophy that male centred philosophy is objective and neutral. It is only when readers who do not fit its perspective - for example, women - speak out that the mendacity of the myth is exposed.

This critique of traditional philosophy is important, and although much remains to be done, a great deal of excellent work has highlighted the failures of canonical philosophers to address women's issues and include women's lives. The significance of this process lies in its allowing feminists to deconstruct systems of thought which have been powerfully restrictive, having been accepted without question, or even acknowledgement. I have tried to show that the description of the relationship between philosophy and literature in Plato's *Republic* has had this kind of effect on those writers who have tried to describe it anew. Yet I do not think that the solution is to ignore this text; and this is why I have sought to expose and interrogate it. But once this is done, what next? Redressing the balance, and reclaiming literature's ability to be philosophical will not be simple or straightforward task.

As Genevieve Lloyd has pointed out in the case of Reason,<sup>65</sup> there are some fundamental structures in philosophy which may seem objective but in fact incorporate bias. As feminist philosophy develops, the struggle becomes less concerned with showing women's absence in the history of philosophy, and more about how we are to express "our side of the story" in and on our own terms. So although I accept neither the separatist nor the liberal position, I do suggest that it may be appropriate for feminist philosophers to develop a self conscious methodology for the production of a feminist philosophy which engages with the tradition.

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<sup>64</sup> See Joanna Hodge, 'Subject, Body, and the Exclusion of Women From Philosophy', in *Feminist Perspectives In Philosophy*, ed. by Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (London: MacMillan, 1988), pp. 152-168.

<sup>65</sup> Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" In Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1982).

Indeed, there may be some methodological approaches which feminist philosophy has already engendered. One is related to the emphasis on the position a philosophy comes from; a focus on the voice of the speaker, which transpires as a result of recognizing the unacknowledged prejudice of many traditional philosophers and their works. This may suggest that feminist philosophy by and large has nothing to gain by claiming neutrality for itself, as for example Sandra Harding seems to risk with her notion of 'strong objectivity'.<sup>66</sup> Strong objectivity in this sense makes patriarchal claims for feminism, arguing that recognizing and redressing misogyny in philosophy can lead to a "successor science" which is finally and truly objective.

My suggestion is rather that feminists can expose the position of others and at the same time acknowledge their own position. In addition, feminists can beware of the danger of labelling their analyses a truthful solution to the problems raised by patriarchy, as Harding tends to. It is not part of a feminist agenda to believe that we have finally got it right. This argument is not to be dismissed as extreme relativism might be, by a self reflexive criticism, because it is not itself a final answer. It is rather a call for perspectivism<sup>67</sup> and collectivism, a suggestion that feminists look at how themselves and others might see things, where the one who looks is always implicated. In this way feminist philosophy may attempt to bring the philosophical mainstream closer to the world of literature, by looking at philosophical proposals in terms of the question "who is speaking?".<sup>68</sup> The recognition of the significance of this question will count as an important sense in which philosophy may learn from the novel. Chapter Two in particular will focus upon this situating of voice in order to produce an inclusive philosophical practice.

Another way in which feminists can engage productively with philosophy, as I have already indicated, is by struggling to break free of dichotomous thinking. Rejecting the compulsion of either/ or alternatives which delimit and restrict answers in terms of necessity, will form the theme of Chapter Three, which will rather value possibility and contingency.

Together these two approaches effect a critique of the patriarchal tradition of philosophy as unphilosophical; as a way of approaching problems which limits and inhibits thought. As a

<sup>66</sup> See Sandra Harding, '“Strong Objectivity” and Socially Situated Knowledge', in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking From Women's Lives* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 138-163.

<sup>67</sup> I use this phrase in the sense and spirit in which it is commended by Ellen Messer-Davidow in her article 'The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms', *New Literary History*, 19:1 (1987), 65-103 (p. 89).

<sup>68</sup> In this feminism may be said to offer a distinct Foucauldian flavour. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972), pp. 50-55.

result, feminist philosophers may encourage philosophers to constantly rethink their method and purpose. This inevitably involves a new appreciation of the methods and purposes of others, and of other ways of writing. One significant method which may be introduced by feminists is the principle of demonstration of philosophical notions, which dissolves pedagogical associations of traditional philosophical teaching. This idea will provide the conceptual scaffold for Chapter Four.

This represents an indication of the ways in which the traditional - philosophy - might be said to be in a position to learn from the new - feminism. In this light, the innovative steps towards literature and literary concerns seem even more commensurate with feminist philosophical methodology. Situating a voice involves, for example, examining the method of narration of ideas. Discussing possibilities is a freedom which literature enjoys to a greater extent than traditional philosophy. And finally, in Wittgensteinian terms, fiction is in a position to show notions which cannot be simply told.

So, in spite of the hostility of the tradition of philosophy towards feminism, this latter has much to offer it. By engaging with the philosophical tradition, feminists can change it in ways which do not threaten the philosophical enterprise, nor undermine its purpose. Rather, they affirm the significance of philosophy, and its potential for development and change, and for different kinds of realization. In addition, the methodology which feminism proposes to philosophy makes it an appropriate partner to assist a further engagement with literature.

The next difficulty is where to place the axis of philosophical interpretation. I have chosen throughout this thesis to concentrate upon epistemological questions, for three main reasons. First of all, it has proved most challenging for philosophers in the mainstream to be persuaded that the construction and critique of theories of knowledge can benefit from the contribution of different perspectives like feminism or literature. Both of these elements function as stumbling blocks for traditional epistemology, challenging and problematizing almost every assumption which the philosophers in this field make. Secondly, I wish to overcome the Rorty/ Plato thesis that my attitude towards epistemological issues determines my attitude towards literature. Rather, I will maintain the conviction that literature may present its own epistemologically relevant arguments, either in response to questions posed by traditional philosophers, or in response to philosophical hypotheses which they themselves frame. Thirdly, the structural features which I adopt through the thesis, namely perspectivism, possibility, and presentation, indicate the influence in particular of feminist



epistemology, which has in recent years sought to emphasize the significance for their field of the consideration of these notions in philosophical terms.<sup>69</sup>

One of the consequences of my adopting this focus upon knowers and knowing is that the relevant textual analysis may be weighted towards humanist concerns. In addition, given that I read Plato's understanding of poetry quite specifically as narrative fiction, it might seem appropriate to focus my interpretative interests upon the tradition of "what happens in the story". In combination, these two factors seems to indicate, and perhaps even justify, a textual analysis which confines itself to the concerns of character and plot. Indeed, some philosophers suggest that such aspects exhaust the interesting features of literature for philosophers. Peter Lamarque, for example, identifies a 'humanistic' response to literature whose

core idea is that works of literature, through the medium of fiction, can serve the end of advancing, helping to develop and understand, exhibiting through their themes and vision, matters of general, perhaps universal human interest.<sup>70</sup>

This may be contrasted with the 'antihumanist position' of much contemporary literary theory (p. 5), which disqualifies itself from philosophical interpretation because it is isolated and self-referential. Unlike the interpretations dominated by humanist concerns, such a position is trapped within the text, unable to see outside it. Such a perspective can, it would seem, be avoided by the adoption of an interpretative agenda which places the focus firmly upon the characters of fiction, what happens to those characters, and what the combination of these features successfully communicates to the 'universal human interest'.

Lamarque's position here seems to suggest an approach to the question of how it is possible for literature to be philosophical which begins by examining what the two have in common. His attitude, which he contrasts with that of Plato, is that literature can be philosophy's helpmate, assisting him towards his goals. Unfortunately, this approach is in danger of seeking ways in which literature may be assimilated to philosophy. The question thus becomes, how can literature be made to share the focus and concerns of philosophy as we know it? This reactionary translation of the question into a way of making literature safe and manageable for philosophers is not commensurate with my plans in this thesis. Moreover, there may be a number of ways of challenging such a translation.

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<sup>69</sup> See for example Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge: Thinking From Women's Lives* for the significance of perspectivism for feminist epistemology; Jane Duran, *Toward a Feminist Epistemology* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991); for a feminist epistemological shift of the focus from impossibility to possibility in theories of knowledge; and Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) for a discussion of the way in which models of instantiation, in particular, examples of knowledge acquisition which adopt the model "S knows that P", pose particular problems for feminist epistemological critiques.

One way of successfully critiquing such a suggestion is by focusing upon the way in which ideas are presented in traditional philosophy, and arguing that the written status of philosophy has a significant bearing upon the ideas which are to be read in such texts. This is the project of Derridean deconstruction in texts like 'White Mythologies'.<sup>71</sup> Derrida argues in this essay that the relationship between philosophy and metaphorical language is of crucial significance. Although typically singled out for vilification by traditional philosophy, Derrida takes it upon himself to demonstrate the implications of the proposal of a character in Anatole France's *The Garden of Epicurus*. It is asserted in this text that

"any expression of an abstract idea can only be by analogy. [...] the very metaphysicians who think to escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colours of the ancient fables, and are themselves but gatherers of fables. They produce white mythology" (p. 213).

For Derrida, the fact that metaphor is both anathema to and indispensable for philosophical writing is a constant source of fascination, and in this article he explores what he takes to be philosophical expressions of the tension between the two factors. In this way, Derrida offers a valuable response to those philosophers who would take forms of writing to be a study which is by definition distinct from philosophy. However, Derrida's approach might also be seen as a mirror image of Lamarque's. Where Lamarque tries to assimilate literature to philosophy, analytic philosophers might argue that Derrida is trying to assimilate philosophy to literature. I am of the opinion that Derrida's writing is more sophisticated than this, and deserves greater consideration by analytic philosophers. In addition, I share Derrida's view that a consideration of the bearing which literature has upon philosophy must involve a reassessment of the canon of philosophy itself. Nevertheless, I think that a successful approach to the question of how literature might be philosophical which engages analytic philosophers, as I aim to do, must take the concerns of analytic philosophers seriously, and endeavour to address those concerns by expressing exactly and precisely the values which

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<sup>70</sup> For example, Peter Lamarque's *Fictional Points of View* contains a critique and assimilation of this humanistic response; see Chapter Eight, 'Tragedy and Moral Value', pp. 135-149 (p. 3).



literature might hold for philosophy, rather than simply making such concerns part of my critique. In addition, I wish to specifically avoid the possibility of being accused by either literature or philosophy of having an assimilationist agenda.

As a result, it is my intention to examine my texts carefully and without the prior exclusion of any particular aspect of literary or philosophical value. In other words, I see no good reasons for the exclusion of the consideration of aspects of literature other than character and plot. I do not make a point of specifically searching for such features, because this would be a way of imposing my pre-conceived notions of how philosophy may be applied to literature. In other words, I would be perpetuating the problematic notion of philosophy as the master discipline. It is part of my determination that this perpetuation should not take place in this thesis that there will be no exclusive formula or agenda for textual analysis. Figurative language, then, and the way in which positions are presented in the novels, will form part of my textual analysis in this novel, where they fit into the broader structural context of my argument. But such considerations will not require the exclusion of aspects of textual analysis which may fall under the categories of "plot and character".<sup>72</sup>

I have tried to show in this section that the attitude of much analytic philosophers towards feminists and the possibilities of feminist contributions to philosophy is greatly lacking. However, I have also indicated that the way in which problems which feminist possibilities seem to present for traditional analytic philosophy might be taken to suggest potential approaches to the question of the relationship between philosophy and literature, and a study which addresses one of the issues might usefully address the other.

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<sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 207-271.

<sup>72</sup> So for example, I seek to explore the philosophical implications of perceptual metaphor in the first chapter, but I also incorporate into this analysis an exploration of the contribution which such metaphors make to the characters of the protagonists (see esp. pp. 105-116).



In the next section on feminism and literature, I will show that literature has been more welcoming to feminist perspectives than philosophy, and so explore the ways in which developments in feminist literary theory might assist my project.

## 2. AND LITERATURE

In the cultural map I have drawn so far, literature and women are thrown together as the negative counterparts of philosophy and men. Moreover, it is part of this dualistic conception that, whilst philosophy can utilize literature, and men can utilize women, the negative concepts are confined within their own otherness. In addition, under the terms of Plato's system, literature and femaleness are identified, and so limit one another. In this section I want to argue that the positioning of these two elements in this traditional ideological structure has led to severe problems for the relationship between literature and feminism. Nevertheless, I will further argue that with the exposition and rejection of the derogatory traditional model, the connection can be a source for creative investigation of the core issues of both disciplines. I will conclude with an indication of how the combination of women and literature can be used for liberating rather than restrictive purposes. In this sense, I will offer a deliberate collusion with the Platonic claims, in the hope that this might problematize the entire value system.

In accepting its place in the map that I have outlined, literature risks adopting its own internal dualisms. In other words, if literature is to be looked down on by philosophers, then some types of literature seek to duplicate this pattern, valuing themselves over others in turn. Poetry, for example, is often thought to be the literary form *par excellence*, and the novel, its negation. In this sense the poetic becomes to the fictional what the philosophical is to the

literary. A fairly typical expression of this adherence to a dichotomous value system is the assertion by the poet Joseph Brodsky that compared with other literary forms

verse writing is an extraordinary accelerator of conscience, of thinking, of comprehending the universe.<sup>73</sup>

The superiority of the form is regarded as guaranteeing this apparently philosophical propensity.<sup>74</sup> I understand this attitude to be an expression of the position that once accepted, there is no escape from the dichotomous value judgements; items always have to be valued, even locally, at the expense of something else. This aspect of a materialist economy has, I suggest, been evident throughout the traditions of which I speak.

And in this economic system, the novel forms the underclass. One reason for this is its connection as a form with women. Most novelists were and are women, and in a patriarchal world anything associated with women tends to acquire a negative value. This in part explains why one strategy of feminism in the eighteenth century was to dissociate itself from literature, which for rationalists, represents the unthinking world of emotions and sensuality. For this reason, Mary Wollstonecraft includes fiction in a list of the controlling features of patriarchy;

Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women the creatures of sensation, and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments, the only improvement they are excited, by their station in society, to acquire.<sup>75</sup>

For Wollstonecraft, women are allowed access to fiction only because it keeps them submissive and weak. One of my arguments in this thesis will be precisely the opposite. However, Wollstonecraft insists that the form of fiction functions as a tool of control, and so ought to be rejected by feminists.

<sup>73</sup> See Joseph Brodsky, 'Nobel Lecture, 1987', trans. by Barry Rubin, in *Brodsky's Poetics and Aesthetics*, ed. by Lev Loseff and Valentina Polukhina (London: MacMillan, 1990), pp. 1-11 (p. 11).

<sup>74</sup> This is commensurate with Heidegger's notion that '[a]ll art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*'. Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 15-87 (p. 72, author's italics).

<sup>75</sup> Wollstonecraft, p. 152.

In the terms of the tradition I have outlined, Wollstonecraft sees the segregation of women and fiction as a feminist task. However, like Plato the literary artist philosopher, Wollstonecraft has a less than simple relationship to her ideas, since she herself wrote novels. Together with her expressed beliefs on the negative influence of fiction on women's lives, this may be interpreted as justification of a biological determinism; a suggestion that, however much they may wish it, women cannot escape their connections with literature. In other words, the text of Wollstonecraft's life and the testament of her opinions reveal that women are limited in ways they simply cannot do anything about. In the case of Mary Wollstonecraft's feminism, it seems that biography is destiny.

This leaves us in the unfortunate and aporetic position of having women regarded as a problem for feminism as well as for literature. And yet feminism has a much more established history in literature departments than in others. Although feminist criticism began in this discipline as it did in philosophy by critiquing its masculinist history, and exposing the ways in which women were mistreated or ignored by the male practitioners of the discipline, feminists very quickly established a history of female literature. The feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have played an pivotal role in this erection of a tradition of women's writing.<sup>76</sup>

In particular, in contrast to academic philosophy and other theoretical writing, the novel in English is a genre of the arts which has arguably come to be dominated by women, in terms of both consumption and production. It is a vital form for women artists, as fiction was probably the first art historically in which they received adequate attention and even critical acclaim, as women. As Rosalind Miles notes;

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<sup>76</sup> See especially *The Norton Anthology of Literature By Women: The Traditions In English*, 2nd edn., ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New York: Norton & Company, 1996).

women and the novel have been particularly important to one another, as the novel has been the only literary form in which women have participated in numbers enough to make their presence felt.<sup>77</sup>

I accept Miles's thesis that the novel

has been the preferred form for women writers almost since women began to write, and it has been the chosen medium through which in recent years women have investigated and published those aspects of their lives as sexual beings that have not previously been acknowledged by art or society. (p. 2)

Moreover, recent feminist critics have tended to see the novel positively as a genre which women have claimed as their own. This is viewed as significant in economic terms, enabling women to improve their earning power; for example, Elaine Showalter has said that in the second half of the eighteenth-century;

The copyright sale of even a mediocre novel by an unknown author was likely to equal the yearly wage of a governess.<sup>78</sup>

For women to dominate a literary genre is also aesthetically significant, for it means not only that issues relevant to their lives enter into the arena of public debate, at least at some level, but also that women authors can shape their own methods of narration, devise their own techniques of expression, develop their own form language, and so on. I suggest, therefore, that to allow philosophical interpretations of the novel form can be a way of understanding women to be discussing philosophical notions in and on their own terms.

However, the novel has not been easily won as a 'female form'. Gaye Tuchman, for example, with the help of Nina Fortin, identifies a '*period of redefinition*', in the early history of the novel, where the genre was reconceptualized by 'men of letters', that it might retain an elite status.<sup>79</sup> Tuchman argues that in this way male authors invaded and took control of the genre. Women's writing could be tolerated once more as acceptable and appropriate behaviour, since the way in which they wrote was considered separate from the male world of serious thinking. So, despite inhabiting a tradition which they helped to

<sup>77</sup> Rosalind Miles, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 2. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>78</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1982), p. 48.

define, the goalposts were changed, and women writers found themselves in the position of having to challenge that tradition.

In the same way, the erection of a tradition of women's writing has not proved uncontroversial. If Gilbert and Gubar can be lauded for their reclamation of women writers' role in the traditions of literatures in English, they may also be criticized for their dogmatic, blinkered approach which is, at worst, guilty of essentializing women's literature, and valorizing continuity.<sup>80</sup> I have sympathy with such a critique, not because I do not think that there was not a time when Gilbert and Gubar's methods were both a necessary and effective part of a feminist agenda, but rather because I think it is important to defend a tradition in feminist literary criticism of perpetually undermining traditions. I regard this to be a way of bringing activism to literary theory. In addition, the significance of genre as a site of resistance is widely acknowledged, as Linda Hutcheon's confident remark that 'of course, the categories of genre are regularly challenged these days' reveals.<sup>81</sup>

So, the process of challenging and revising the novel in its myriad forms may be regarded as a creative opportunity for women writers. Genre revision in particular seem to offer a range of ways in which structural challenges to patriarchal literary modes might be articulated.<sup>82</sup> As a result, I choose it as a way of demonstrating the possibility of learning from the novel.

Another reason for my choice of the division of genres is that I may thus retain the important representative feature of this work. In other words, I hope that what I demonstrate specifically in relation to one novel, will have wider application throughout an identifiable genre. This will enable me to contribute theory through practice. At the same time, it is

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<sup>79</sup> Gay Tuchman with Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 8, author's italics.

<sup>80</sup> For an argument to this effect see Gail Godwin, 'One Woman Leads To Another', *New York Times Book Review*, 28 April 1985, pp. 13-14.

<sup>81</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 60.

<sup>82</sup> See for example Anne Cranny-Francis's 'Introduction' to *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp. 1-28.

inevitable that my desire to practise close textual analysis leads to a certain lack of representation. Although the texts I will discuss do cross boundaries of class and sexuality, none fall outwith the category of Anglo-American authors. The lack of racial difference is a problem which concerns me, but seems insurmountable in the face of limitations of space; I cannot include everything I would wish. Attempts to represent have their negative aspects as well as their positive ones.

The genres I have chosen might all be described as genres of popular fiction, more at home in the best seller lists than in university libraries; two of the books I look at have been made into films, one has been made into a television production, and all of them have been commercial publishing successes. In addition, I hope to show that all of these texts have important academic application, particularly in that perhaps least catholic of academic considerations, the philosophical. In this sense I am attempting to reclaim the popular as more than mere entertainment, as well as reclaiming the philosophical for the popular. In the next section I hope to make my aims even clearer, by attempting to define my concepts, and answering that crucial question which in its significance unites the concerns of literary critics, feminist theorists and philosophers; what is the point?

### ***C. What Does It Mean To Be A Feminist Philosophical Novel?***

Having rejected numerous ways in which other theorists have attempted to draw together feminisms, literature and philosophy, in the negative tradition of analytic philosophy, I now feel the need to provide a specific reconceptualizing of their association. In this section, therefore, I am going to explain what I think it means to be a feminist philosophical novel, in two separate senses. The first will examine the pragmatics of this meaning, or how this



interdisciplinarity works, in terms of an attempt to define the basic elements, and a proposal for how the three might work together, in spite of but also because of, what I have argued against in the rest of this chapter.

The second section will involve an analysis of what it means to be a feminist philosophical novel in terms of what the consequences might be. In other words, what it means for me to be arguing this in the first place. This section will account for my motivations and ambitions in writing this thesis. It is the culmination of my theoretical chapter, and will be followed by its words being put into practice in a series of test cases, which will hopefully fulfil my task of showing what it means to be a feminist philosophical novel.

## 1. DEFINING TERMS

In order to find out how feminist philosophical novels work, I will begin by attempting to define each of my terms. And yet there is a problem here. Edmund Burke points out that

when we define, we seem in danger of circumscribing nature within the bounds of our own notions.<sup>83</sup>

Definitions are notoriously problematic, and I am aware that they in some sense work against certain principles with which I have aligned myself, for example, the rejection of general limitations imposed prior to specific examinations. But in order for each element to become a useful part of my triumvirate, I want to make some effort to represent their meaning, so that there may be some sort of general understanding as to what I am trying to bring together. So, the limitation effect occurs only in terms of this thesis; when I say “this is what philosophy is”, I mean that this is what I want to be understood to be referring to when I use the word “philosophy” in the course of this piece of work. I do not mean to render inadmissible the

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<sup>83</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 12.

definitions of others, and my aim in definition will be to develop those notions of feminism, literature and philosophy with which readers are already conversant. Once my reluctance to define has been registered, I will not be ignoring the problems introduced by these issues. In fact, in some senses, I will be keen to highlight the paradoxes of each definition. In addition, I will to some extent undermine my own project here, since a definition seeks to distinguish some issues from others, and yet I will conclude with a most suitable definition being one which unites all three elements.

Feminism is becoming increasingly difficult to define, and indeed feminists themselves are becoming increasingly reluctant to pin themselves down in such a way. To describe themselves as having a particular, collective aim is thought not only to be false, but also to be at odds with the concept and ideals of feminism. Feminism may nevertheless be described as a belief system which reads the world of the past and the present as essentially characterized in terms of patriarchal traditions. It seeks to interrogate these traditions, which it takes to be a way in which patriarchal systems of thought are perpetuated without justification, in the interests of the patriarchy.

There are two problems apparent in this conception. First, how to reconcile the definition of feminism as opposing patriarchy given that feminism is inherently opposed to dichotomous structures. The answer to this problem may lie in resisting the idea that feminism is simply "anything that is not patriarchal". Secondly, there is a problem of how to reconcile the notion that traditions are always a problem for feminism, with the urge to construct and insist upon feminist traditions, for example of the novel, or even revised conceptions of novelistic genres. A useful response to this problem may lie in my notion of the essential contingency of traditions for feminism.

Philosophy has myriad interpretations. Colloquially, to be philosophical about something is to intellectualize it, to abstract oneself from the situation and regard it objectively. However, as with many terms taken into general usage, this fails to capture the full sense in which the term philosophy might be used. It is true that philosophy concerns abstracting oneself in terms of a pause, which enables one to reflect. The subjects of philosophy are those things with which we are often engaged; philosophers ask us to stop doing them in order that we might examine what it is we are doing. But this is not strictly true, as the pause is not necessary, and might possibly be prohibitive to the philosophical task. Preferable is a certain self consciousness which would allow me to examine what I am doing as I do it. For example, it would be unwise for me to stop breathing in order that I might examine my respiratory processes; intellectualizing in this sense would be unhelpful and incidentally fatal. The notion of distancing in the colloquial conception is misleading, then, because it suggests that to philosophize is to retreat from real life in order to think about it.

This is where the idea of philosophers inhabiting the ivory tower may be said to originate. In recent years, many branches of philosophy have resisted this, spawning interests which make deliberate moves towards the real world; practical or applied philosophy is now an important part of the discipline as a whole. Moreover, it draws attention to the fact that philosophy is about our lives, and as such is inseparable from the real world. Any distance is taken paradoxically in order to move closer to the subject; to focus our attention on that subject, considering it anew. I will focus further upon this conception of philosophy in Chapter Three, which concerns utopian fiction.

There seems here to be a conceptual connection between philosophy and feminism. Both apparently offer a way of looking at a world, and aspects of that world, to which people appear to have grown accustomed. They question our assumptions that the way things are is

the way they must be, and highlight alternatives which may work better at explaining the world for us.

Finally, a very simple meaning of literature may refer to a piece of writing in which the way in which it has been written is taken as being as significant, if not more so, than what it is about. Literature is a kind of writing which calls attention to the kind of writing it is. This definition does not introduce paradoxes, in the way that my definitions of feminism and philosophy did, but it does seem to be less than specific. In fact, both feminism and philosophy might coherently be defined in precisely the same way. The cooperative theme returns. Perhaps I should conclude with an absolutely collective definition.

Feminism, philosophy and literature all constitute incitements to read, and this is the way in which I shall be thinking of them throughout this thesis. This pins down, I think, the fundamental concerns of each discipline for the purposes of my thesis. Differences of where how or upon whom this incitement takes place are up for debate, as are the different rates of success in the project of incitement. This proposition provides the ideological connection between the three notions, and forms a significant part of the answer to the question of how the possibility of a feminist philosophical novel works; by bringing together the core concerns of the disciplines, and understanding them together.

## 2. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

In part, the question of consequences is an anticipation of the question “what is the point?”.

Why am I writing this thesis and what do I hope to achieve in it? Most obviously, my wish is

to demonstrate that it is possible for both literature and feminism to contribute to philosophy in ways which will have an effect upon each discipline.

In terms of interdisciplinarity, this may be expressed in terms of a discussion of the ways in which much of our conceptual and ideological work is structured by divisions. Boundaries are drawn in order to demonstrate clearly where one thing ends and another thing begins. But as Edmund Burke suggests, boundaries are not neutral tools, and critical thinking must be applied to the way in which divisions affect those things which they divide. In order for this thesis to make sense, I have to write in terms of certain marked off areas. Yet I hope at the same time to make these markings a subject for discussion. In this sense, my aim in this thesis is to divide in order to unite. Distinctions are made in order that thought may be given to the validity and grounding of those very distinctions.

One clear aim of the thesis, then, is to investigate the possibilities of interdisciplinary work, through the notion of an incitement to read. I hope to show that if such a study is carried out without giving extra weight to one side, then all disciplines involved can learn. In other words, interdisciplinary work does not represent a temporary sojourn into another field, from which writers and readers may withdraw unaffected when their task is complete. It is a natural consequence of centuries of departmental separatism in universities that much interdisciplinary work privileges one intellectual arena over another. This academic imperialism often leads to the marginalization of some perspectives, which are regarded as secondary and peripheral. So, whilst it appears that borders are being stretched, in fact all that happens is the temporary and conditional admission of, for example, a feminist perspective into the traditional field of science, which remains largely unaffected.

If this is progress, it is very limited. In order to produce a study which both breaks boundaries and expands frontiers, I am resisting the privileging of one field over another.

Feminism, literature and philosophy will be equal perspectives on this work, since I believe this will be the only way to achieve a balanced result, and indeed, to successfully 'expand the frontiers of the politics of reading'.<sup>84</sup> This expansion may be effected by philosophical analyses of literature which retain literature's own particular perspective.

In this way, the practice of expanding frontiers can be conceptually radical, affecting more than one area at the same time. Novels can be seen as philosophical, not in spite but because of their position as literature, and so lead philosophers to develop their notion of what counts as philosophy and why, not just by erecting more border patrols to defend their methods, but rather by recognizing and working with potentially new and exciting media, which may introduce new practices and options for conceptual thinking.

Interdisciplinarity between feminism, literature and philosophy rests, I have said, upon incitements to read. The reconceptualizations of genre that I offer in the following chapters will represent a development of this incitement to read. In other words, I will locate my understanding of each genre at an intersection of feminism, literature and philosophy. In this way I hope to demonstrate that it is possible for literature to be philosophical, and for feminists to write philosophy. In addition, the process of working through the notions of feminism, literature and philosophy, in my analysis, will show that all three, as disciplines, can learn from the novel.

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<sup>84</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', in *"Race", Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 262-280 (p. 278).



## Chapter Two

### Philosophical Autobiographical Fiction

What a discovery that would be - a system that did not shut out.

Virginia Woolf<sup>1</sup>

I begin my demonstration of the possibility of learning from a novel with a meditation on the philosophical which may be found within the genre of autobiographical fiction. This chapter will focus on the way in which the self is presented philosophically in fiction, and consist of an analysis of some philosophical issues which may be found in such philosophical presentations of the self. Under the epistemological schema of this work, it will examine specifically the knower's awareness of he/r self, by which I mean specifically he/r struggle to achieve, understand and express, the subject position which s/he occupies.

My thesis in this chapter, that literary autobiographies can work as feminist philosophical, is a fundamentally inclusive one, in accordance with Woolf's wishes. In this sense it contrasts with much western philosophy concerning the self, and contemporary autobiographical theory, both of which I will describe as exclusive. I begin with an examination of this exclusivity, which I will suggest can only fully be understood in terms of the hostile relationships between feminism, philosophy and literature. The negativity involved in the understanding of autobiographies as feminist philosophical will then be turned around to ground my positive demonstration of feminist philosophical autobiographies, where I will examine two novels, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, thus suggesting their representative potential as feminist philosophical fiction. It is my intention that the theme of inclusivity will prove crucial to all aspects of such interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (London: Sussex University Press, 1976), p. 19.

## **A. Limiting and Conditioning Autobiographies**

The patriarchal forms of literature and philosophy have both insisted that the writing of the self is a project which falls outside - usually beneath - their consideration. Moreover, the lines drawn in exclusion have often incorporated an anti-feminist perspective. When I have outlined the collusion involved between literary criticism and philosophy in this anti-feminist rejection of autobiography, I will look briefly at some significant attempts to salvage the genre, in apparently anti-feminist and feminist forms. I will characterize these efforts to reclaim autobiography as similarly exclusionary.

### **1. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE LITERARY**

Anyway autobiography is easy like it or not autobiography is easy for anyone.<sup>2</sup>

As a schoolchild, I, along with many others, was taught to produce basic narratives under such titles as "what I did at the weekend". This served to provide valuable lessons in self esteem, suggesting that others wanted to be told what I did. It seemed that my story mattered. Telling one's past in this way represents a first stage in learning to write creatively. The assumed level of textual objectivity - that I know and can most accurately describe my experience - makes the task manageable. So manageable, in fact, that it requires little or no creative skill, and can be practised by children. In this sense, writing one's own story is easy for anyone.

This is an very crude outline of what autobiography consists in. And yet the conception of autobiography as both artless and immature plays a crucial part in its being rejected by literary

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<sup>2</sup> Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Heinemann, 1938), p. xi.

critics. A common criticism of new literature is that it is too much a story of the author's life; too confessional, too personal, and not creative. Antony Beevor reflects this mood when he remarks of Keri Hulme's Booker Prize winning novel *The Bone People* that

the power of this remarkable book is greatly diminished when the story turns into a fairy-tale of the Me Decade.<sup>3</sup>

From this it follows that insofar as a work is autobiographical, its value and status as literature may be called into question (or here, shifts from being a 'remarkable book' to a mere 'fairy-tale'), and candidates for literature may be criticized for being autobiographical *per se*.

Literature, as artistic creation, is opposed to the autobiographical, which is 'easy for anyone'.

Through the patriarchal lens, the interpretation of autobiographies as artless and immature forms of writing immediately leads to their association with women. In this sense, difficulties which theorists have with the genre of autobiography are expressed in terms of a characterization of autobiographies as girlish. This characterization works in two ways, both of which serve to constrict and devalue women's writing. Firstly, it has left an interpretative limit on texts written by women as, as Ruth Parkin-Gounelas notes;

[a]ll female writing has traditionally been decoded as autobiographical, as a literal rendering of the life of the author.<sup>4</sup>

Under such a schema, women's writing always counts as life reports, and never as art.

Secondly, the supposed ease of autobiographical writing becomes, again when viewed through the patriarchal lens, a critique of women writers which says they are only capable of producing such texts, which once more fail as artistic creation, or literature, and may instead be condemned as mere autobiography. The thesis that women's lives taint their texts may be said to be insidious in criticism. The problem is not anything about the life of the writer in particular, but merely the idea of a life being evident in the work at all. It is critics'

<sup>3</sup> Antony Beevor, 'Review of *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme', *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 October 1985, p. 1202.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Parkin-Gounelas, *Fictions of the Female Self: Charlotte Brontë, Olive Schreiner, Katherine Mansfield* (London: MacMillan, 1980), p. 5.

embarrassment at being confronted with signs of life in literary art which engenders hostility to autobiographical texts. For example, the authors of a recent book on Sylvia Plath insist that

[a]ll her writing is autobiographical; she can never escape from the subject of her own impressions, her own miseries, tempers and nightmares.<sup>5</sup>

The ambiguity evident in this remark is revealing. The criticism appears to be directed at the topics and themes of Plath's work, which are thought to be consistent in their limitation.

However, the use of the word 'subject' suggests that it is a confinement to the self for which Plath is being criticized. The problem with Sylvia Plath, it seems, is that she cannot escape from herself. Such critics seem uncomfortable with the idea that literary artworks may be produced by someone who is human and writes from the perspective of this humanity. The fact that she is a woman may increase this feeling of discomfort for those writing within the confines of patriarchal structures.

Similarly, Joanna Russ notes the frequent use of the term "confessional" to disparage women's texts,<sup>6</sup> and also, interestingly, the use of the term "writer" to disparage women's lives. An example of this latter may be found in Rousseau's remarking that

a female wit is a scourge to her husband, her children, her servants, to everybody [...] she is very rightly a butt for criticism.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary criticism still considers the life of a writing woman to be an appropriate target for critics, and this is another reason why explicitly autobiographical texts by women are often dismissed. Put simply, if women's lives in patriarchy are ignored and dismissed, then the writings of those lives do not stand much chance of gaining respect. Conversely, a successful revaluation of women's autobiographical texts would seem to have clear benefits from a feminist point of view. Brodzki and Schenck, for example, begin their project with the assertion that

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Claridge, Ruth Pryor and Gwen Watkins, *Sounds From the Bell Jar: Ten Psychotic Authors* (London: MacMillan, 1990), p. 207.

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (London: Women's Press, 1984), pp. 29-30.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Russ, p. 31.

[a]utobiography localizes the very program of much feminist theory - the reclaiming of the feminist subject.<sup>8</sup>

However, reclaiming a subject in the terms of an autobiography seems to fall foul of two contemporary theoretical principles; that of the death of the subject, and that of the death of the author. Moreover, since this double funeral is of two ideas which are often said to be irredeemably phallogentric, there are clear implications for feminist theory. Let me explain. The first of these ideas is a staple of post-Lacanian theory, specifically involving the thesis that there can be no access to the self; and consequently no expression or true representation of the self. This position has clear implications for the genre of autobiography, since it insists that, as Marc Eli Blanchard puts it, 'the subject is not and can never be a part of the discourse he utters'.<sup>9</sup> Ihab Hassan agrees that the genre of autobiography is 'impossible', and further labels it 'deadly'.<sup>10</sup> For much contemporary criticism, a work which is defined by its task of self expression does not even deserve to be called art, because it involves an unacknowledged, mistaken, and even dangerous assumption that the self may be presented in any coherent form at all.<sup>11</sup>

Paul de Man has discussed this autobiography problem in an interesting way in his article 'Autobiography as De-Facement'. De Man specifically excludes the epistemological questions which are touched by autobiography in an aside;

The interest of autobiography [...] is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge - it does not - but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of topological substitutions.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, 'Introduction' to their edited collection *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 1-15 (p. 2).

<sup>9</sup> Marc Eli Blanchard, 'The Critique of Autobiography', *Comparative Literature*, 34:2 (1982), 97-115 (p. 97).

<sup>10</sup> Ihab Hassan, 'Parabiography: The Varieties of Critical Experience', in *The Postmodern Turn: Essays In Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1987), pp. 147-166 (p. 147).

<sup>11</sup> An interesting exception to this theoretical commonplace is Gabriele Schwab's *Subjects Without Selves: Transitional Texts In Modern Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), which attempts to read contemporary literature for evidence of 'literary subjectivity'. Nevertheless, this notion is determined at least in part by a rejection of 'philosophical notions of subjectivity' (p. ix).

<sup>12</sup> Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *Modern Language Notes*, 94:5 (1979), 919-930 (p. 922). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

In this way, the genre, or rather situation, of autobiography is shown to be acutely paradoxical; it presents itself as writing which involves discussions of self knowledge, and in that very presentation, reveals that such discussions are impossible. This explains why there is a sense in which all writing is autobiographical, and at the same time a sense in which no writing can be autobiographical. This apparently liberating thesis serves to abolish any generic understanding of autobiographies. For if classification as autobiography is fundamentally arbitrary, applicable both always and never, then no space is created for comparison between texts, and autobiography loses its force as a critical approach.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, de Man's negative hermeneutics<sup>14</sup> excludes the philosophical from autobiography on two different levels. Autobiography, he insists, cannot speak to the theme of self knowledge. In addition, the reading effects, or, in my terms, arguments, of autobiographical texts are characterized as monolithic; they must necessarily present the case for the death of the subject. This is itself a totalizing thesis, and as such will not fit with my understanding of the philosophical as incitement to read. Yet for de Man, it is the only possibility for autobiographical texts. Despite criticizing the 'confining' (p. 919) and 'stubborn' (p. 922) attitudes of other critics towards this genre, de Man produces an absolutism of his own.<sup>15</sup>

De Man assumes that all discussion on self knowledge is grounded by the erroneous premise that self knowledge is strictly reliable and has revelatory possibilities, and so that the language of autobiography is aporetic because it aspires to the 'specular' (p. 922). This recalls the assumptions behind the setting of my homework on weekend activities. Yet for de Man,

<sup>13</sup> I allow that there is always some element of the arbitrary in genre classifications, but would like to retain the notion that there must be some general agreement as to the kinds of texts which will count as participating in any given genre, in order for there to be any meaningful discussion about which texts may be included and which not. In this sense I might say that genre classification is not fundamentally but incidentally arbitrary.

<sup>14</sup> I use this term quite specifically to mean reading a text in order to find out what it is not.

<sup>15</sup> This dogmatic tendency of de Man's article is also noted by Bernard Harrison, who suspects that de Man is offering conclusions about 'what the stance of autobiography [...] must be'. See Bernard Harrison, 'Rhetoric and the Self', in *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 188-218 (p. 206, author's italics).



autobiographies are not artless in the way that childhood narratives are. This may be explained in terms of the way in which fiction is an integral yet unquantifiable element of autobiography. That fiction and autobiography have an undecidable relationship is an idea which, for de Man, is 'uncomfortable' and 'not [...] sound' (p. 921). In this de Man's position seems at odds with the celebration of undecidability which often characterizes deconstruction. However, de Man also argues that deconstruction can discover 'interest' (p. 922) in autobiographical texts by focusing upon the doubleness of a text's both resisting and insisting upon specularity.

Part of de Man's deconstructive agenda is a contempt for the logocentrism of Western metaphysics, in its assumption that utterances correspond directly to states of consciousness. Any analysis of autobiography seems to risk perpetuating this myth. For de Man, this explains why the tropes of autobiography must demonstrate their own inadequacy.

If the death of the subject in literary theory renders the genre of autobiography problematic, then the death of the author underlines this difficulty. Barthes and Foucault have famously urged that critics recognize the stultifying effect which reference to an author of a text has upon interpretation, since it risks positing the author as originator of textual meaning and significance, and so producing exclusive interpretations.<sup>16</sup> The influence of these positions has led literary theorists to balk at, or even avoid altogether, the idea of a kind of writing which seems to concern itself with the identity not merely of a self but specifically of the author.

De Man offers a reading of Wordsworth which constitutes an attempt to make the case for the death of the author, by showing that any attempt to refer to a unifying principle beyond the text is foiled by other aspects of the text. On this, as on other matters, de Man's thesis contains

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<sup>16</sup> See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148; and Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', trans. by Josué V. Harari, in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives In Post-Structural Criticism*, ed. by Josué V. Harari (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 141-160.

aporetic features of its own. So, despite denying autobiography's generic status (p. 921), de Man offers a way of understanding autobiographies as a set of texts, in terms of the textual analysis of an 'exemplary' one, Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (p. 924). Moreover, this analysis is presented through appeals to interpretative solidarity. References to a familiarity with Wordsworth's *œuvre* ground de Man's familiar interpretation, which consists of casual, prompting references and a premise of agreement;

One thinks of such famous passages in *The Prelude* as the hymn to the new-born child in Book II ("Blest the infant babe...") that tells how "the first/ Poetic spirit of our human life" manifests itself. A condition of mutual exchange and dialogue is first established, then interrupted without warning [...] Or one thinks of the drowned man in Book VII. (p. 924)

In this way de Man makes explicit the 'mutual exchange' between Wordsworth's texts; a dialogue between the text in front of one, and the connections which one makes through one's idea of the author, with other texts. In addition, there is said to be a set of autobiographical information which has a history of familiarity and application;

As is well known, it is this episode which furnishes, in an earlier variant, the textual evidence for the assumption that these figures [...] are figures of Wordsworth's own poetic self. (p. 924)

That de Man allows himself to tell readers how they read Wordsworth's texts in this way seems to me to have a crucial bearing upon the subject in question. And yet for the author of this article, the description of a common critical background, or, in Stanley Fish's terms, an 'interpretive community'<sup>17</sup> of Wordsworth readers, for whom the life of the poet is 'well known', offers a path away from the concerns of the essay. In other words, having been established, this condition of mutual exchange and dialogue is now interrupted, with an autobiographical warning, as de Man tells himself

[t]his takes us of course, beyond the scope of this paper; I must limit myself to suggesting the relevance of the *Essays Upon Epitaphs* for the larger question of autobiographical discourse of self-restoration. (pp. 224-225)

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<sup>17</sup> See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Because it contains such autobiographical moments, de Man's thesis is not so straightforward as might at first be supposed.

The combined critical execution of the author and the subject suggests that any appeal to the notion of artefactuality is limiting, and therefore to be resisted. Instead, all texts must be analysed in New Critical isolation, that is, in terms of inherent patterns and structures within the text, rather than with appeals to something outside it. This response necessitates the abandonment of the concept of autobiography, since it accepts that the ideas which might help to distinguish the genre have been successfully assassinated in such a way as to render the genre theoretically indefensible.

I have two main problems with this response. The first becomes clear with a comparison of the suggestion that readers ignore the concept of the author with an idea that texts should be approached under laboratory conditions. By urging that readers escape the critical constraint of restitution to an author, this view commends a position of transcendence which is untenable. This difficulty becomes even more acute in the case of autobiography, because autobiographical texts are presented in the very terms of a frame of reference to the author which may not easily be erased, even with sustained effort.

My second difficulty with the response is that it employs a restriction upon reading which is the reverse side of the coin to that restriction it attempts to redress. In other words, although it is true that biographical criticism imposes a limitation upon interpretation, in the sense that attempts to read the text become attempts to find out, in a peculiarly phallogocentric way, what the author meant; a diametrically opposing view, which says that beliefs which the reader has

about the author can never form part of a legitimate interpretation, is just as restrictive. In this sense, the response is fundamentally confined within and by its own theoretical status.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the theory still holds sway, and has left autobiography in a position of exclusion, to be retained only, it would seem, as a term of abuse for the texts produced by women writers. Moreover, the race to reject autobiography has become bound up with a rejection of philosophy. Although this latter is explicitly a rejection of an impossible phallogocentric philosophy, other, more interesting forms of philosophy are discarded along with it. As a result, the suggestion that the extent to which texts are autobiographical is the extent to which they cannot attain the status of literature, is pervasive, patriarchal and problematic.

The dominant trend in analytic philosophy can be shown to treat the genre in a remarkably similar way. De Man's assertion that reliable self knowledge may not be produced in autobiographies could be seen as a suggestion that it can be represented elsewhere, for example in those 'textual systems' which are **not** 'made up of tropological situations' (p. 922). In this it is possible to identify a correspondence with analytic philosophers, whose argument is that it is their job to demonstrate reliable self knowledge.

## 2. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL

The free intellect will see as God might see, without a *here* and *now*, without hopes and fears, without the trammels of customary beliefs and traditional prejudices, calmly, dispassionately, in the sole and exclusive desire of knowledge - knowledge as impersonal, as purely contemplative, as it is possible for man to attain.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Seán Burke similarly argues that death of the author criticism demonstrates the limits of theory, in his *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 93, author's italics.

The notion that autobiography is easy suggests that the task of the autobiographer is to focus on the immediate, the obvious, the surface. The simplicity of the task necessitates an elision of difficult or specifically philosophical questions. Fitted into a traditional framework, Stein's commenting that it is easy for anyone to write an autobiography may be seen to endorse a strict division between autobiography and philosophy. Russell's remark clearly supports this distinction. For him, philosophy's very task is to separate itself from those "passions" or "impurities" which will distort and cloud our philosophical vision. Traditional philosophers in this way may exclude autobiography as a kind of writing which epitomizes particularity; it focuses on one person, telling only their story, where philosophy ought to speak universally, to tell everyone's. So, even if philosophical texts and autobiographical texts discuss the same issues, the two are not to be compared because where the former are enlightening, the latter are self indulgent.<sup>20</sup>

The problems with this view may become clearer by looking at an example. In the first volume of her autobiography, Janet Frame describes the uncertainty of moving from adolescence to adulthood, and wondering what she might do with her life;

I asked myself that old question which haunted me as a child, Why was the world, why was the world? And where was my place?<sup>21</sup>

In the *Meditations*, Descartes is similarly troubled by the meaning of the world and his position in it;

At this moment it does indeed seem to me that it is with eyes awake that I am looking at this paper; that this head which I move is not asleep, that it is deliberately and of set purpose that I extend my hand and perceive it [...] But in thinking over this I remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions.<sup>22</sup>

The suggestion that the former remark is not philosophical, whilst the latter is, seems odd.

Both writer's projects are written in the first person, both concern such staples of philosophical

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<sup>20</sup> There are two significant exceptions to this general rule, in the form of the *Confessions* of Augustine and Rousseau, which are generally accepted as canonical. I do not mean to dismiss these two texts, but neither do I consider their existence to undermine my argument. Patriarchy has always admitted of exception disruptions of the pattern, so long as they occur on its terms.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Is-Land: An Autobiography* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 236, author's italics.

<sup>22</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations On First Philosophy: In Focus*, ed. by Stanley Tveymen (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 47.

inquiry as existence and the meaning of life, and both might be said to stimulate consideration of such ideas in those who read their words.

Yet a philosopher might argue that the questions raised by Descartes in relation to understanding the world and his place in it are philosophical because they lead to universal considerations on the mind body problem, or the problem of defining consciousness, where Frame's counts as a specific, and therefore trivial, case of pondering. His use of I is merely exemplary, or a means to an end, where her use of the first person is fundamental. Where Frame merely delineates her experience, Descartes demonstrates how everyone experiences the world and his place in it.

This argument is flawed in many ways. One problem is that ignoring Descartes' use of the first person can lead directly to misinterpretations of his ideas. Elizabeth Anscombe notes for example that

Saul Kripke has tried to reinstate Descartes' argument for his dualism. But he neglects its essentially first-person character, making it an argument about the non-identity of *Descartes* with his own body.<sup>23</sup>

For Anscombe, it is a mistake automatically to exclude the autobiographical from philosophical consideration since the autobiographical may be relevant to the philosophy. Here, Kripke ought to have translated the considerations of the *Meditations* to his own perspective, in order for it to have the force which might make its argument effective. Perhaps then, it is this force, which constructs knowers as 'infinitely replicable',<sup>24</sup> which makes Descartes philosophical and Frame not-philosophical. Descartes' philosophy is presented in such a way as to demand identical results for the meditations of any sane rational person. His ponderings may be applied universally in a way in which Frame's may not.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe, 'The First Person' in *Self-Knowledge*, ed. by Quassim Cassam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 140-159 (p. 140).

<sup>24</sup> I take this phrase from Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 166.



Anscombe may be happy with this distinction, yet the way in which philosophers have traditionally insisted on universalizing ideas has also attracted a great deal of criticism from feminists. This criticism may be said to fall into two categories. First of all feminists argue that traditionally, philosophers have mistakenly assumed that their perspective counted as universal and therefore objective. In fact, historically, philosophical objectivity can often be exposed as a white heterosexual male subjectivity which does not satisfy the standard of objectivity required by philosophy. Specifically, the so called universality of Cartesian meditations, their supposed capacity for infinite replicability, turns out to be nothing of the kind.<sup>25</sup> This is how the false assertion of universality leads to exclusivity. If I say I speak for everyone, where in fact I only speak for everyone **like me**, I exclude those who are not like me.

Secondly, given that objectivity has proved to be an obstacle to understanding in philosophical history, some feminists have moved from this recognition to questioning whether in fact objectivity is a desirable goal for philosophers. Feminist philosophers have suggested that there may be at least some philosophical issues which require the participation of perspective; where the acknowledgement of a position from which the philosopher speaks, must be taken into account if progress in the question is to occur.<sup>26</sup>

If this is the case, then philosophical issues connected with self knowledge could be prime candidates for such participation. Indeed, I suggest that the attempt to understand and express my awareness of the kind of thing I am requires some kind of subjective contribution. This is not an original observation. Thomas Nagel has noticed the problematic absence of the first person in most works on the philosophy of mind, in his essay 'What is it Like to be a Bat?',

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<sup>25</sup> The metaphysical atomism proposed by Descartes has been roundly deconstructed and found wanting by feminist philosophers. See for example Naomi Scheman, 'Though This Be Method, Yet There Is Madness In It: Paranoia and Liberal Epistemology', in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays On Reason and Subjectivity*, ed. by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 145-170 (pp. 151-156).

<sup>26</sup> See for example Nancy C. M. Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground For a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism', in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel Publishing, 1983), pp. 283-310.

and concludes that unless philosophers try to grapple with the question of the nature of subjective experience, they are 'sidestepping' the issue.<sup>27</sup> Nagel, it may be assumed, sees an advantage in recognizing the autobiographical element of philosophy.

Yet this is not the case. Nagel insists that the self need not appear in a text which purports to examine the self. There is nothing of Thomas Nagel to be found in the text of 'What is it Like to be a Bat?'. Rather, he insists that analyses of the self with a view to discovering what makes me me, are analyses of a '*type*' (p. 171, author's italics). It is for this reason that Nagel believes that the problem of the self is analogous in difficulty to the struggle to find out what it would be like to have the experiences of a being completely unlike us. I think that Nagel is simply mistaken in this. Whether or not I am able to say what it is like to be a bat has no bearing whatsoever on my ability to say what it is like to be me. Nagel's analysis itself sidesteps the issue of subjective experience, because he deliberately avoids speaking for himself.

If questions involving the self do require some autobiographical input, then the assumption that the specificity of Frame's remarks disqualifies them from being philosophical is clearly erroneous. On the contrary, Frame's willingness to speak for herself retains a significance lost by (Anscombe's) Descartes in his struggle for speak for everyone. The fact that autobiographical writing does not present itself as universalizable prevents it from retaining the problematic claims to generality, and thus exclusivity, two notions which have plagued traditional philosophical writing. Just as the false assertion of universality has paradoxically exclusive effects, so the acknowledgement and delineation of a subject position can lead to inclusivity, as readers are offered the space to apply the ideas presented to themselves. The presentation of an individual perspective in autobiographies offers an opportunity for the

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?', in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 165-180 (p. 180). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

exploration of philosophical questions from a perspective which is often ignored by traditional philosophers; questions associated with the person who takes up the position to be analysed, but in a form which allows for the participation of others.

Another connected problem with the interpretation which valorizes Descartes' use of the first person and imposes limits on Frame's is that there is nothing about either text which necessitates their being read in any particular way. So Descartes' text might easily be read as a personal narrative of exploration, revealing psychoanalytic facts about the philosopher himself,<sup>28</sup> and Frame's autobiography might be read as exemplary, revealing to the reader a way of looking at the world and he/r place in it. This ability of the reader to take philosophical meaning from a text which is outwith a given structure of philosophical discourse is a crucial proposal of my thesis. In the context of this chapter on autobiography, this emphasis on an active reader will serve as a defence against the charge of autobiographical writing as singular and unrepresentative, and furthermore, help to present the case for inclusivity.

Like the literary rejection of autobiography which I examined earlier, the insistence that autobiography is a form of writing which can have nothing to do with philosophy incorporates a gender bias. It is no coincidence, I suggest, that Janet Frame is female and René Descartes is male. Specifically, I now want to propose that suggestions that autobiographies are unphilosophical and girlish do not constitute two separate claims, but that in fact the two judgements are related in close and interesting ways. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist novel, *Nausea*, genderizes autobiographical writing in precisely the same moment as it rejects it as unphilosophical activity. Roquentin, the novel's protagonist, decides to stop noting the "trivia"

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<sup>28</sup> See Jonathan Rée, *Philosophical Tales: An Essay on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 11-24, and Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness: (Literature/ Philosophy/ Psychoanalysis)*, trans. by Martha Noel Evans and the author (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 35-55, for respectively, autobiographical and psychoanalytic approaches to the *Meditations*.

of his life, and concentrate philosophically on his essence. This decision involves the introductory claim that

I'm going to give up writing down my impressions, like a little girl, in a nice new notebook.<sup>29</sup>

In the context of the novel, readers may interpret this in two ways. Perhaps this is what Roquentin does, and the following "diary-entries" represent a rejection of the girlish impressions, and concentration on the manly contemplation on being. On the other hand, the following novel may be just this writing, which the protagonist has not been able to resist completing, and the statement above is merely part of Roquentin's despair; his wish to trivialize his thoughts. Under either interpretation, the genre of autobiography is seen first of all as being unphilosophical, and secondly, as being associated with a specifically female immaturity.

The inseparability of the claims first, that autobiographies are women's texts, and second, that they are in opposition to that which is philosophical, is efficiently demonstrated in an exchange between Hypo and Miriam in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*;

'Women ought to be good novelists. But they write best about their own experiences. Love-affairs and so forth. They lack creative imagination.'  
'Ah, imagination. Lies.'  
'Try a novel of ideas. Philosophical. There's George Eliot.'  
'Writes like a man.'  
'Just so.'<sup>30</sup>

The text executes a development of the Platonic value system I outlined in Chapter One, by positing men and philosophy on one side and women and autobiography on the other of a binary opposition. Here the opposition is made explicit, which offers a better idea of how such assumptions work. Hypo assumes that his analysis is descriptive, that he can talk collectively about women, what women ought to do and what they in fact do. In his argument, women function as a unified homogenous totality, admitting of neither diversity within the group nor of

<sup>29</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. by Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage IV* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 240.

variation in the position of individuals over time. And yet, '[t]here's George Eliot'. The acknowledgement of an exception to Hypo's rule does not affect his argument, because Eliot is said to make the leap across from autobiography to philosophy by becoming a man both nominally and textually. As a result, although Miriam rejects Eliot as a model for her writing, the grounds on which she does so fail to serve as an objection to Hypo because they simply confirm the opposition within which he operates. It is precisely because Eliot '[w]rites like a man' that Miriam should follow her in the attempt to write something of importance; something '[p]hilosophical'.

Attempts to exclude the autobiographical from the philosophical and *vice versa* characterize the work of literary critics and philosophers, I have suggested. In the next section I will examine how attempts to revalue autobiographies have failed to break this pattern of exclusion.

### 3. RECLAIMING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

An influential theorist of autobiographies in the twentieth-century is Georges Gusdorf, who seeks to reclaim the texts of autobiography as historically and culturally specific artefacts, where the cult of the individual, here perpetuated by the individual, reigns supreme. Gusdorf takes the plethora of autobiographies in Western society since the Renaissance as indicative of intellectual progress; men have overcome the 'anguish' which they experience when first they confront the self, to arrive at a stage where they can celebrate their separateness and their uniqueness.<sup>31</sup> An autobiography counts as such a celebration. It is an individual's story of his own success.

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<sup>31</sup> Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions and Limits of Autobiography', trans. by James Olney, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 28-48 (p. 34). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

The emphasis on and importance of the individual serves to connect this literary genre with philosophy, as Gusdorf recognizes, quoting Nietzsche's remark that

every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography. (Gusdorf, p. 46)

Autobiographies, then, are about the great heroes and heroisms of the Western history of ideas.

They are written to express an individual's self knowledge;

The author, who is at the same time the hero of the tale, wants to elucidate his past in order to draw out the structure of his being in time. And this secret structure is for him the implicit condition of all possible knowledge in every order whatsoever. (p. 45)

Yet this expression is not to be confused with truth, since it reveals its hero 'not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and have been' (p. 45). So far, this looks promising as a strategy for noting the philosophical - and fictional - aspects of autobiographies. These stories of achievement are, however, limited to 'Western man' (p. 29). Other cultures are considered imaginatively incapable of autobiography, trapped in the earlier stages of anxiety with regard to individuality. For example;

[t]he wisdom of India considers personality an evil illusion and seeks salvation in depersonalization. (p. 30)

Non-westerners are not the only groups who cannot satisfy the conditions of autobiography.

Within a Western society, any peoples who are not at the centre of a social structure cannot be said to represent themselves in autobiographical form, because they do not participate in the success of which the autobiography is fundamentally an account;

It is obvious that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist. (p. 30)

Since writing one's life must fall into the category of a success story, women's lives in patriarchy 'obvious[ly]' may not be included as potentially autobiographical. In order to defend autobiography as 'a solidly established literary genre' (p. 28), Gusdorf felt he had to place limits on those selves and lives which may be expressed in the genre. If, when



autobiography was easy, it was assigned to women, then when it is taken seriously, when it is regarded as philosophical, it must be reclaimed for men.

In other words, for Gusdorf, the revaluing of the genre of autobiography involves the reinscription of a male philosophical centre, which asserts its primacy in Western society, and recalls Plato's offering of positive roles to a masculinized philosophy, and negative roles to a feminized other. Just as Plato sees philosophy as a kind of writing under threat from the pretenders of literature, Gusdorf sees the genre of autobiography as a kind of writing under threat from outsiders, who can neither participate in the society which autobiography celebrates, nor aspire to its subjects.<sup>32</sup>

Gusdorf's reclamation of autobiography has been analysed at great length by feminists.<sup>33</sup> Although his theory seems decidedly anti-feminist, perhaps even misogynistic, it would be possible to interpret it in such a way as to make it agree with the category of a negative feminism, which argues that patriarchy is so conceptually pervasive that it renders women incapable of writing autobiographies which don't ape men's autobiographies. The feminist critic Shoshana Felman, for example, appears to agree with Gusdorf's analysis, insisting that '*none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*'.<sup>34</sup>

Felman's reference to 'the problematic of autobiography for women' (p. 15) is, I would suggest, also Gusdorfian. Other feminist critics, whilst taking issue with Gusdorf, often choose to respond in his terms. A common response has been that which suggests that Gusdorf

<sup>32</sup> For an even more explicitly neo-Platonic interpretation of autobiographies as philosophical, see James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972). Olney describes what happens in autobiographies in the following way; 'one of the many in the heretofore meaningless created universe becomes, in the formal projection of cosmography-and-autobiography, the creative One of his own coherent, richly meaningful, intensely organized, altogether self-oriented universe' (p. 8).

<sup>33</sup> For an analysis of the preponderance of feminist critiques which focus on Gusdorf, see Jeanne Costello, 'Taking the "Woman" Out of Women's Autobiography: The Perils and Potentials of Theorizing Female Subjectivities', *Diacritics*, 21:2-3 (1991), 123-134 (p. 131).

<sup>34</sup> Shoshana Felman, *What Does A Woman Want?: Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 14, author's italics. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

describes a type of writing with which women are not concerned. This is commensurate with the predominantly postmodernist feminist view that feminist projects are threatened by the concentration on autobiographical texts.<sup>35</sup> Another more positive response chooses to talk about a kind of autobiography which women can be said to write. Patricia Meyer Spacks, for example, talks about 'the high tradition of spiritual autobiography', of which there is a separate 'female version'.<sup>36</sup> The texts which Spacks discusses in this article are characterized as 'self-effacing', a way in which women writers engage in 'self-denial' (p. 132). Shari Benstock and Susan Stanford Friedman amongst others have pointed out, *contra* Gusdorf, that there are other types of autobiographies, associated with women writers, which rather than focusing on the presentation of complete selves, seek to question the notion of selfhood.<sup>37</sup>

These feminist critiques of Gusdorf have clearly been influenced by de Man. They echo and applaud the latter's critique of a notion of autobiography which invokes the myth of the self existing holistically, separately, and uniquely. This much, I think, is useful, and I accept their arguments against such a myth. However, I have also indicated some problems which I found with de Man's thesis; for example, I suggested that his insisting that autobiography asserts the death of the subject places a requirement on autobiographical writing which precludes any understanding of philosophical content. In accepting this particular argument feminist critics may be understood to have added to de Man's thesis the gender associations proposed by Gusdorf, and thus reverted to a Platonic conception of philosophy which excludes women. As a result, even when feminist critics argue against Gusdorf, they may finally share his putative proposal of a literary essentialism, thus proposing that in a patriarchal society men write novels of the former sort, satisfying Gusdorf's theory of philosophical autobiography, and women

<sup>35</sup> See for example Luce Irigaray, 'Any Theory of the "Subject" Has Always Been Appropriated By the "Masculine"', in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 133-146.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Selves In Hiding', in *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 112-132 (131). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>37</sup> See Shari Benstock, 'Authorizing the Autobiographical', in her edited collection *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 10-33; and Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice', in the same volume, pp. 34-62.

write autobiographies as de Man envisions them; non-philosophical, and asserting the death of the subject.

Taken literally, this analysis reverts back to biographical criticism, and the notion that the text can be made to mean with reference back to the power or powerlessness of the real life of the author.<sup>38</sup> One alternative is a pragmatic approach, which might posit the sex of an author as an interpretative strategy; as for example one of Kamuf's 'critical levers with which to displace the imponderable weight of patriarchy' (p. 298). Yet such a strategy has its own restrictions, for example in suggesting that autobiographies may undergo a simple interpretative test, anticipated by Miriam in *Pilgrimage*, based upon whether the autobiographer 'writes like a man', or a woman. Such an interpretive strategy also assumes a predetermined sex category of writing. In other words, it assumes that there is already something that it is to write like a woman. I posit instead that the very flexibility of sex categories, presumed by Kamuf, exposes the fact that they may not be employed in this way; that we do not yet know how or what women may write.<sup>39</sup> Further, I suggest that even understood pragmatically, compliance with these categories is largely uninteresting, and that interpretation might more usefully focus upon analysis of those features which the use of sex labels attempts to reduce to essential characteristics of writing by women.

I conclude from this that there are other ways of salvaging autobiographical theory than confining oneself or even merely responding to, Gusdorf's terms, which are not only dependent on the problematics of the metaphysics of presence, as exposed by de Man, but also, as I have shown, upon their grounding in the Platonic association of men with philosophy at the centre,

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<sup>38</sup> My attitude to this is similar to that of Peggy Kamuf, when she accuses Spacks' critical arguments elsewhere of 'biological determinism.' See Peggy Kamuf, 'Writing Like a Woman', in *Women and Language In Literature and Society*, ed. by Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), pp. 284-299 (p. 285). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>39</sup> See Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman, 'Contingencies', in their edited collection *Feminism Beside Itself* (New York, Routledge, 1995), pp. 1-8, for an evocation of this feminist perspective.

relegating women to the unphilosophical margins. By accepting his terms, these feminist critics not only confine their feminism to the negative, but also share Gusdorf's restrictive conception of autobiography, and of philosophical novels.

So, Gusdorf's attempt to reclaim autobiographies, and those theorists who have responded to him, have proved successfully anti-feminist, revealing an unacknowledged correspondence between critics that women are confined to the non-philosophical margins, where men control the philosophical centre. If the options are presented as dichotomous, if autobiographers are divided into whether they present an egoistic universal subject, or a fragmented personalized subject, and if, in addition, these alternatives become sexed, then autobiographical theory has once again become limited and conditioned.

In this section I have argued that the focus on the individual, particularly if that individual is a woman, has proved to be a problem for literary critics, for whom autobiographies were thereby artless, and that it has proved to be a problem for philosophers, for whom autobiographies were thereby thoughtless. I examined these objections and found them to be prejudicial and unnecessary, concluding that there is no reason in principle why I should not value autobiographical writing, either from the point of view of literary criticism, or from that of philosophy. In particular I argued that texts within the genre, in order to be philosophical, need not perpetuate the myth of the metaphysics of presence. I now wish to go further, and suggest that there reasons why I **should** value autobiographical writing; that there are philosophical advantages in doing so. This claim radically rejects the position previously assigned to autobiography, by claiming that which is often regarded as problematic about the genre as an advantage to my interpretation. This involves moving on from the negative assertions about the impossibility of particular versions of the self, and instead building upon the conviction that

there are some useful notions which individuals might disclose about their own subject position in the writing which I will hereafter refer to as autography.

### ***B. Autography Is Feminist and Philosophical***

In the search for Woolf's 'system that does not shut out', or more specifically, a way of describing the genre of autobiography that is consistent with the notions of feminism and philosophy as incitement to read, I have looked to those systems which do shut out, in order to find the weak spots in their barriers. I have hinted at these weak spots in different contexts throughout, and now hope to draw them together, and walk through the wall.

My argument here is that there are interesting questions to be asked about what it is to occupy a particular subject position, and that these questions should not be left exclusively to traditional philosophers. Specifically, I claim that the reliable expression of self knowledge consists in no more and no less than my effective descriptions of how I see myself, that feminists have an interest in retaining this conception of reliable self knowledge, and that the genre with which I am here concerned constitutes the most appropriate place to understand this concept.

I have three ways of describing this genre in such a way as to collectively justify these claims. The first involves removing the notion of life writing from consideration, the second values the specificity of self writings, and the third emphasizes the role of the reader in showing the capacity for the genre to be both feminist and philosophical.

## 1. EXTRACTING THE BIO

I want to begin by rejecting the notion of autobiographies as life stories or reports; writing which may be characterized as artless and immature, valorizing experience, and participating in phallogocentrism. Autographies may not be said to offer an accurate biography of the author, but rather to tell a story of the self. An acknowledgement of the fictional status of autography involves an understanding of the author fundamentally as a character, on behalf of whom the autographical makes no ontological claims. As a result, evaluation by standards of realism, or lack of it, is out of place. It is difficult to see what an ontological mistake in this context would be. Like the statement “I do not exist”, responses to autobiography which say “this incident did not happen to you like this” just do not make sense. The person who offers them does not understand the terms in which s/he is speaking.

This does not mean, however, that the author of an autobiography counts as the originator and guarantor of the meaning of he/r text. Rather s/he may be understood as a textual projection of the autobiography. In other words, the attempt of the writer of an autography to describe he/rself is not to be confused with an attempt to de-scribe he/rself. In this sense the notion of autobiography usefully invokes that of intertextuality, establishing itself as an intertext, in the Barthesian sense of that word, emphasizing ‘the impossibility of living outside the infinite text’.<sup>40</sup> An autography is thus understood as a site of textual fusion, where the author contributes he/rself as one of its intertexts. In other words, this genre can be thought of as one where, crucially, ‘the subject returns, not as illusion, but as *fiction*’ (Barthes, *Pleasure*, p. 62, author’s italics).

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<sup>40</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 36. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.



In order to emphasize these points I will henceforth utilize the term autograph, leaving out the notion of life-writing in order to concentrate on the notion of the self.<sup>41</sup> The term autograph may be used as a remainder term for similar reasons, and as such it describes merely what is left when the “bio” is discarded. However, I think that the term has an independent significance. To lend my autograph to something is to record my perspective. It serves as a reminder in the future that I was there in the past and witnessed something then, to be remembered now. It is the indication left by my hand of me, there and then, to you, here and now. In this way autographical texts may be said to disrupt the distinction between presence and absence.<sup>42</sup>

The use of the term autograph also signals the notion of a commitment.<sup>43</sup> The commitment of autography is reflexive, in the sense that the autography declares a commitment to the writing of the self, but also entails a commitment to the reader. That such a commitment is ethical is signalled by Seán Burke, who argues that

the signatory act installs the ethical within the graphic, making an ethics of reading and of writing possible.<sup>44</sup>

And yet the commitment is also epistemological, since it offers a personal investment, in the form of a speaking subject’s point of view. Derrida provides an illustration of this, appropriately enough in his essay ‘The Ends of Man’;

Let me be permitted to speak in my own name here [...] When I was invited to this meeting, my hesitation could end only when I was assured that I could bear witness here, now, to my agreement, and to a certain point my solidarity with those, in this country, who were fighting against what was then their country’s official policy in certain parts of the world, notably in Vietnam.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For a history of the term autography, see H. Porter Abbott, ‘Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories’, *New Literary History*, 19:3 (1988), 597-615 (p. 615).

<sup>42</sup> See Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Event Context’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 307-330.

<sup>43</sup> See Jacques Derrida, ‘Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name’, trans. by Avital Ronell, in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. by Christie V. McDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), pp. 1-38 (esp. pp. 14-15).

<sup>44</sup> Seán Burke, ‘The Ethics of Signature’, in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern, a Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), pp. 285-291 (p. 290).

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Ends of Man’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 109-136 (p. 113).

As a remark offered during the course of the lecture in New York in October 1968, this works as an admirable defence of academic freedom of speech, and a significant rejoinder to those who argue that deconstruction is apolitical and uncommitted. Yet the remark also has a significance as part of a published article, written by someone who wishes to ‘bear witness here, now’ to a position defined in terms of support for the position of some readers. Derrida commits himself primarily to ‘my agreement’ with anti-government protesters, and thus inscribes himself as a political intertext, in the midst of this article on ‘The Ends of Man’, an essay which is only written because it was possible to include this bearing witness, this ‘speak[ing] in my own name’.

This autographical moment in Derrida’s text demonstrates the principle defended by my notion of the autograph; offering one’s self in a text as a commitment to a position with which readers may, if they wish, and for as long as they wish, identify. The interesting questions about Derrida’s remark are not the sort that ask “would the historical figure Jacques Derrida **really** have refused to give this lecture if he hadn’t been allowed to offer support for US peace movements?” or “was there **really** a danger that Derrida would have been prevented from saying such things?”, but rather the sort that asks “how do the additional texts - historical, political, and autographical - introduced here contribute to our reading of this article?”.<sup>46</sup> It is in this way that the genre of autography avoids the trap of logocentrism. I suggest that an awareness - without paranoia - of the trap posed by the myth of the metaphysics of presence facilitates a break away from the naive conception of writing of the self as a mere report. Moreover, once it is accepted that ideas **are** always already mediated, autography as a form which admits its own position and perspective, and crucially, makes no ontological claims about what is **really** ‘here’ and ‘now’, can operate as a highly sophisticated presentation of

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<sup>46</sup> This is not to deny that I might be interested to know the answers to the former types of question, just as I might want to know what kind of shirts the speakers on the panel wore.

ideas concerning the story of the self, allowing me to speak in my own name, and thus offer information from my perspective about my perspective.

## 2. AUTOGRAPHICAL SITUATIONS

One of de Man's criticisms of the genre is the individuality of the texts which are labelled autobiographical. He says;

[e]mpirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm. (de Man, 'Autobiography', p. 920)

In the terms of my analysis, the fact that these texts differ should come as no surprise, since they each constitute the attempt of a different self to describe he/rself. De Man's suggestion comes down to the idea that difference - of selves - makes the genre impossible to characterize.

In fact I suggest that the opposite is the case; it is precisely the diversity of selves which is elemental for the genre. Far from undermining the norm, difference may be said to usefully pick out a significant feature of the intertextuality of autobiography. At the same time, the diversity of selves makes possible the philosophical contributions of autobiography.

Because the autobiography is essentially a first person narrative, it represents and purports to represent only one voice. As such, autobiographies make no immediate claims to the general or the universal, but rather emphasize the direct relationship which the text has with one person. This is, then, a committed intertext, trusted by the reader and invested in by the author. The notion of the commitment of autobiography, grafted on to a distrust of phallogocentric narratives, suggests that the most truthful way to tell the self is to offer it as a story.

Donna Haraway has presented convincing arguments for the power of 'situated knowledge[s]', which are accountable and responsible in a way which distinguishes them from purportedly omniscient positions.<sup>47</sup> In an argument which recalls Russell's demand that philosophers strive to see 'as God sees' as a paradigm instance of this position, Haraway rejects claims of theoretical omniscience as 'an illusion, a god trick' (p. 582). Instead she promotes the idea of

pictures of the world [which] should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability, but of elaborate specificity and difference. (p. 583)

Yet Haraway's article left me wondering what it would mean to present a situated knowledge. Since relativism is dismissed (p. 584), it is clearly not simply a case of adding the qualifier "it is true for me that..." to knowledge items. A possible answer comes in the text at an autographical moment when Haraway writes of how the problem came to her;

These are lessons that I learned in part walking with my dogs and wondering how the world looks without a fovea and very few retinal cells for color vision but with a huge neural processing and sensory area for smells. (p. 583)

This sentence, and the possibility of its serving as demonstrative of the ideas presented in the article, suggests a way in which knowledge may be embodied. Autography, I would suggest, counts as a paradigm example of a situated knowledge, which is responsible and embodied. Again, autography may be thought of as committed writing.

The notion of a situated and particular voice has philosophical significance, because it offers a unique reading and voicing of oneself. Yet there is a danger here. Sartre for example suggests that all writing contains the body of the writer in this way, and that this serves to separate the writer from the significance of his art. When a writer reads he/r own work, Sartre laments that

the writer meets everywhere only *his* knowledge, *his* will, *his* plans, in short, himself [...] If he re-reads himself, it is already too late.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question In Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (1988), 575-599 (p. 575). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>48</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Why Write?' in *What Is Literature?*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (London: Methuen & Co., 1950), pp. 26-48 (p. 29, author's italics).

For Sartre, writing represents a double sacrifice on behalf of the author, whose self is given over to a text which he cannot read. In this way literary writing is seen as crucially disembodied; as an escape from responsibility, where inscriptions of selfhood in texts can be noted - albeit traumatically - only by the author. Sartre's grammar shows how this escape from responsibility allows its author to ignore the notion that other readers might be different from him. The emphatic male pronouns reveal the extent to which a masculinist perspective views the subjectivity of a text as restrictive, whilst at the same time excluding female subjects. Sartre inscribes himself into this writing on how an author cannot read a text he has written, and yet insists that this writing is not part of him; that here he is speaking for all authors.

I have shown how Descartes' pretensions to universality paradoxically leads to exclusivity. Sartre's comments also enact a related paradox in connection with the myth of textual self presence. The graphic embodiment which he describes invokes this myth in the context of a claim to universality. The result is aporetic; an assertion of self become text, and a simultaneous denial of self; a refusal to take responsibility. Sartre, here, provides an illustration of (and argument for) de Man's thesis that the notion of autobiography as a genre ought to be abandoned.

I want to distinguish this from the stance which I take on autographies, which is closer to the kind of writing described by Adrienne Rich here;

it's also possible to abstract "the" body. When I write "the body," I see nothing in particular. To write "my body" plunges me into lived experience, particularity [...] To say "the body" lifts me away from what has given me a primary perspective. To say "my body" reduces the temptation to grandiose assertions.<sup>49</sup>

Sartre's remarks fall into the category of "the body", and as such are a source of lamentation, not only for he who writes the body, but also for those who have that writing's universalism

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<sup>49</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'Notes Towards a Politics of Location', in *Blood Bread and Poetry: Selected Essays 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 210-231 (p. 215).

thrust upon them. Feminism's incitement to read as I construe it in this chapter will instead value the autographical text as the assertion of "my body". Because it constitutes the site where the autographical act is performed, the text represents the specific individual who writes, whose being is enacted and created with the words on the page. This element of creation is a crucial aspect of autography, since, as Rich points out, lived experience is not simply reported; rather it is the **act** of writing in a particular way which 'plunges' me into self representation. For women writers to place themselves at the forefront of their texts, for them to write autographies, is a feminist philosophical act, where they take up the opportunity to take control of themselves, their lives and their bodies communicated through and as texts. Autography, then, is an empowering medium; rather than restricting authors whose texts are placed within the genre, it allows them to assert and crucially, confront themselves on the page. Unlike Sartre, they must take responsibility for the self which is read in an autography as an intertext.

### 3. THE ROLE OF THE READER

The reader plays a significant role not only for my understanding of autography, but also for my purpose of showing how it is that literature may be philosophical. This aspect of my argument is best expressed through a suggestion of what may happen when an autography is read.

It is part of my understanding of autography that the reader recognizes he/r self in the text. This may be contrasted with the assumed detachment of much twentieth-century criticism. Frances Murphy Zauhar, for example, says that



[m]ainstream Literary Criticism has [...] reinforced the convention that the “good” reader remains detached from the reading, unaffected.<sup>50</sup>

Thus the reader, like the author, is not to let he/rself get too close to the text. In other words, contemporary literary criticism retains an obsession with interpretation which is objective and impersonal. On this view, any attempt to understand one’s self in a literary text seems faintly ridiculous. Yet this is what I want to suggest that the reader of autobiography may do. The autographical text, through its dramatization of a self, offers a connective potential to the reader; there are spaces in the text within which the reader is invited to inscribe he/r self. If this process works, if the text succeeds in connecting, the reader reads he/r self there.

Paraphrasing Rich, to read “my body” plunges me into lived experience, and particularity. In this way autobiography calls into question the way in which reading is understood, and enacts the learning which I propose may happen in the course of that reading process.

I argued to the effect that the author was necessarily a character in he/r autobiography, and suggest now that the reader is also a character involved in an autobiography. The self invention which occurs in autobiography is enacted as much by the reader as it is by the author. Reading an autobiography involves a mutual projection of discursive experience. This means that both characters have their basis in empirical reality. However, this is not to say that either may be supposed to have existed in the way in which they are presented or understood. The notion of projection makes this clear, since it emphasizes the fact that both the reader and the author are constructions from the text, constructions effected by the text. So autobiography describes a communication process between two characters, the reader and the author, as intertexts, and through an intertext which may thus be described as autographical. As a result, the character of the autographical subject, for example, may be regarded as coming into being upon each reading of the text, and the reader may learn new things about he/rself at each reading moment.

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<sup>50</sup> Frances Murphy Zauhar, ‘Creative Voices: Women Reading and Women’s Writing’, in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*, ed. by Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey and Frances Murphy Zauhar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 103-116 (p. 106).

This learning is characterized by Jane Marcus as a way in which the reader of autobiography 'participates, re/signing herself from the author's signature'.<sup>51</sup> Again, this can be seen as a way in which the commitment signalled by the autograph is not an imposition upon, but rather an invitation to the reader. For my purposes, this captures the force of the philosophical implications of autobiography, since it indicates the development of the notion of argument which occurs as a generic effect. Part of the success of an argument about subject positions depends upon the way in which it is read, which thus becomes part of the argument.

In other words, it is as a result of the fact that autobiographies present themselves as the story of an individual that they require the reader's active application of he/r experience to that projected from the text. In this sense autobiographies may fulfil and demonstrate my requirement of philosophy as an incitement to read, here reading of oneself in a text. This activity of the reader has a political aspect because it rejects the notion that the reader passively accepts writings with which s/he is confronted. At the same time the incitement to read of autobiography is fundamentally inclusive, because the involvement of the reader as intertext is part of the philosophical argument of the genre.

In this way autobiographies are offered a philosophical significance not in spite of but because of their generic description. It is a significance which figures as a response to the problem of the philosopher's failure to engage themselves and their readers as subjects. In the next section, I will demonstrate these points in relation to Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (hereafter, *Oranges*).

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<sup>51</sup> Jane Marcus, 'Invincible Mediocrity: The Private Selves of Public Women', in *The Private Self*, ed. by Shari Benstock, pp. 114-146 (p. 116).

### C. *Feminist Philosophical Autographs*

Understanding this self in the text as philosophical expression offers a starting point for an examination of the genre's significance as both feminist and philosophical. I will now proceed to examine the two novels I have chosen as representative of the genre in terms of certain philosophical questions concerning the subject, described with the aid of metaphors traditionally associated with the theme of self knowledge; sight, voice, and mind. These are two texts whose autobiographical status is frequently called into question, or qualified as semi-autobiographical. I regard them as paradigm examples of autobiography as I have described it. In addition, I will argue that *The Bell Jar* contributes a narrative response to Gusdorf's theory of philosophical autobiography, by exposing the problems Esther faces when she attempts to construct herself in the way she thinks tradition demands that she should.

#### 1. (EN)VISIONING THE SUBJECT

Perception is often regarded by philosophers as the first thing to be demonstrated to new students that knowledge is not.<sup>52</sup> In addition, some feminist philosophers have argued that visual metaphors in philosophy are irredeemably phallogocentric.<sup>53</sup> And yet I have already hinted at the significance of vision for a specifically feminist motivated, situated knowledge. This is a proposal apparent in both *The Bell Jar* and *Oranges*. I would like to begin this analysis, therefore, by examining the role of the particular perceptual faculty of sight, in self knowledge, as presented in the two novels under consideration.

<sup>52</sup> In this they follow the classical example of Plato's *Theaetetus*, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Four.

<sup>53</sup> See Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Brontkowski, 'The Mind's Eye', in *Feminism and Science*, ed. by Evelyn Fox Keller and Helen Longino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 187-202.

Near the beginning of *The Bell Jar*, Plath's protagonist, Esther, signals the importance of sight to her learning, by confessing to a penchant for voyeurism. She says;

I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it.

I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time.<sup>54</sup>

Esther presents herself here in opposition to 'other people', from whose pain she can derive pleasure. This much is consistent with Gusdorf and Olney's requirement that writers of autobiography posit themselves as separate from, and even in opposition to, the rest of the world. But the 'lik[ing]' of the first line quickly becomes a repression of negative reactions. As a result, her witnessing of events is self-consciously passive; she has striven to have no response to others' sufferings. And this is presented as the way in which she learns; this is how Esther finds out how 'things were'.

Winterson's protagonist in *Oranges* is established from the beginning as the object rather than the subject, of vision. Jeanette's mother takes Pastor Finch's advice - 'Parents, watch your children' - very seriously.<sup>55</sup> Jeanette shares a bedroom with her parents, and finds that the outside lavatory is 'the only place to go' (p. 16) to get away from her mother's gaze. As a child, Jeanette is not to be trusted out of the sight of those who would act as her guardians, who will tell her all they think she needs to know about "how things are".

I suggest that the protagonists of these autographical novels learn from looking at themselves, a process which will involve converting, in Esther's case, sado-masochistic voyeurism, and in Jeanette's case, passive objectification, into self knowledge. The first move will present the painful process of switching around the gaze. In both novels readers are made aware of the

<sup>54</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 13-14. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>55</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 12. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

difficulties faced by both protagonists in their initial attempts to observe themselves. I will deal with this in reference to the image of mirrors, that place which purports to offer the opportunity to see ourselves as other see us.

It is a generic commonplace to remark that the autographical text shows a mirror to the self. In this mirror, as in all mirrors, I seem to see myself as others see me, and myself as I see others. I am doubled, and this doubling involves alienation - "that can't be me!" - but also gratification and confirmation - "It is me!". The doubling also facilitates doubting - I can misidentify myself in a mirror. My "I" can fail to refer in a mirror. This is interesting because it is generally supposed that use of the first person pronoun is immune to reference failure.<sup>56</sup> This means that even if I make a mistake, for example if I say "I am a courgette", I still refer to myself. Yet for the purposes of the collaboration between author and reader which constitutes the fictional act, I may use the word "I" and not refer to myself. Wittgenstein and others see the image of a mirror as introducing a problem whereby use of the first person pronoun may not be accounted for in terms of immunity to reference failure.<sup>57</sup> But the position of the author of autobiography adds a new dimension to this image. Since the mirror of the autobiography is one of my own construction, I am in control of this reference failure. And the notion of voluntary reference failure, newly possible in autobiography, introduces the paradoxical possibility of self discovery through an escape from the self.

I will try to demonstrate my point in relation to *The Bell Jar*.<sup>58</sup> Sylvia Plath uses specific imagery to tackle the philosophical problems connected with the self. In *The Bell Jar*, the image of the mirror is a philosophical device used to throw a different light upon the self. It

<sup>56</sup> See for example P. F. Strawson, *Individuals: An Essay In Prescriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1964).

<sup>57</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies For the "Philosophical Investigations"* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), p. 67.

<sup>58</sup> Many critics in recent years have objected to autobiographical criticism being applied to *The Bell Jar*. See for example Sheryl L. Meyering, 'Review of *The Bell Jar - A Novel of the Fifties* by Linda Wagner-Martin', *American Literature*, 65:2 (1993), 381-382. However, I am using this term not as an accusation, but rather as a self-conscious generic description. My seeing the text as autobiographical fiction has no bearing on my evaluation of the novel *per se*, nor does it entail any ontological claims about the real life experiences of Plath at the time of the events in her life which correspond to the events in the text.

plays a part in the process of self discovery. It is initially employed to figure a separation of the protagonist not from other people, but from herself; an attempt on Esther's part to see herself as others see her, and as she sees others; not as subject, but as object. So, for example, when the doors of the lift in the Amazon Hotel close on her at the end of an evening, she

noticed a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. (p. 19)

The urge to distinction and separation from others has led to a further separation from herself as an object in the world. The invocation of race, in terms of a vision of herself which Esther rejects, recalls Gusdorf's cultural exclusion. In order to see herself in this autography, Esther must reject all aspects of otherness. So here, she is repulsed by this appearance, and cannot bring herself to identify with the body which she sees. The split which she experiences is not one between herself and the rest of the world, but rather one between herself as subject and herself as object. The protagonist is not failing to see herself as subject; she is something to whom a face belongs. Neither is she failing to see herself as object. She is, however, failing to see these aspects as one. Here readers are confronted with a dramatization of the inadequacy of Gusdorf's theory of autobiography as a simple presentation of a unified self.

It is this alienation from her own appearance which is to be the first step in Esther's process of self discovery. On realizing that 'it was me, of course', Esther attempts to convince herself, through the reader, that this subject, which can speak of 'my face', and this object, which looks like a 'big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman', are one. In traditional philosophical terms, Esther might be said to be experiencing a dualistic crisis. Once outside the elevator, she is moved to remark that 'There wasn't a soul in the hall' (p. 19). No soul, just this body which Esther fails to recognize as her own. Confirmation of this failure comes a few pages later, with the partial echo 'There was nobody in the hall' (p. 24). Esther is trying to learn about herself as she learns about other people, but discovers her insight into her self is different. Her attempt to



count her self among the items in the world results in her losing sight of herself. Yet 'of course', intellectually she knows that this person in the mirror must be her.

At this point of crisis, the only thing for Esther to hold on to is the incarnation of herself which is this autography; this telling of her story. This is what enables her to remind herself of herself - in the context of her telling of her story to us. To confide in the reader that '[i]t was me of course' is to reinstate herself as the subject of the story; for us, object of the story. She is convincing herself that she is, and in doing this, she becomes. Throughout this work, readers will find themselves reading of Esther's trauma, whilst holding in their hands the light at the end of the tunnel; the autographical proof that the protagonist will live to write another day. Such a reading is only made possible by the integrity of the tale. It is in this sense that *The Bell Jar* breaks free of Gusdorf's limits and conditions for autobiographical writing; and also that Esther's character defies de Man's conception of the genre; for it is the attempt to conform to the restrictive tradition which causes problems of identity, and the writing of her self which will overcome this problem.

First, however, Esther persists in the investigation into her mirror image, where the objectification process goes too far. She goes back to another mirror, only to find that things have grown worse;

The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury. (p. 20)

Here the conditions of reflection are focused upon, and objectification is complete. However, for Esther, seeing oneself as an item in the world is now a negative pursuit; it has made her unrecognizable. It spurs her on to search for herself as subject, by having a bath, since 'I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath'. Here she can 'meditate' (p. 21), allowing the collection of experiences which made her look like the face in the mirror to dissolve. It is as if finding the self requires the letting go of the layers of actions which have come to define her.

She wants to see herself and be seen independently of these things. After this process, she 'felt pure and sweet as a new baby' (p. 22). From here she can begin her experiences, and thus her self identification, afresh.

Later in the novel Esther speaks explicitly of the belief that experiences etch themselves on the body of the subject, again in terms of the mirror image. She begins by offering an analysis of binary categories of the kind of people there are, 'Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women' (p. 85). As Esther comes to see herself as one of these people, and thus having to opt for one side or the other, she rejects this picture in favour of a developmental one, where people are defined by what they take from the experiences they have had. So, speculating on her hoped for loss of virginity to Constantin, the simultaneous translator, she refers to the imagined effects of her long dreamt of trip to Europe;

I thought [...] I'd come home, and if I looked closely into the mirror I'd be able to make out a little white Alp at the back of my eye. Now I thought that if I looked into the mirror tomorrow I'd see a doll-size Constantin sitting in my eye and smiling out at me. (pp. 85-86)

Convinced that critical events will add themselves onto her being, will mark her as having something that she was previously without, Esther cites the place she expects to see these symbols in her eyes, as if nothing that happens after she has been marked by foreign travel or having sex, will ever look the same again.

The idea of the subject in process is emphasized by the reflective tone of the passage, which presents the notion as one which she 'thought' at that moment in her life. In this way the text allows for a shifting of understanding as to how the self is developmentally constructed, at the same time as it stresses the significance of where the knowledge comes from.

This is to be contrasted with another earlier conception, this time of learning as acquisition, where knowledge is presented as something which has been 'collected' (p. 53). Instead of this simplistic conception, Esther has now begun to involve herself in the game of learning, such that she regards herself as having been visibly affected by the things which she finds out, in ways which will influence her subsequent experience.

Where in *The Bell Jar*, readers are presented with an adult going through the process of self discovery, in *Oranges* the protagonist tells of her childhood and adolescent search for her self. The character Jeanette, unlike Esther, does not choose the mirror as an introspective tool. Her mirror is forced upon her. Her mirror is her mother.

The Jeanette at the beginning of the novel is her mother's creation. In a curious echo of *Frankenstein*, it is conscious effort on the part of her mother which has brought her to where, when, who she is;

My mother [...] dreamed a dream and sustained it in daylight. She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord. (p. 10)

Jeanette is to become what her mother failed to be; a missionary. This mirror, then, is double sided, with Jeanette urged to follow an example of forthrighteousness and piety set by her mother, and her mother seeing a life develop as she would have wished hers to progress. Her mother wants to live again, and is doing so through Jeanette; Jeanette will learn from her mother's life.

The 'Genesis' of the first chapter is the story of the creation; Jeanette is a self created; defined by her adoptive mother as her own 'vision' (p. 10). The mirror, far from being an introspective strategy, has absolute control. When I am placed in front of a mirror, I cannot escape from my image. At the beginning of Jeanette's story, her dependence on the mother mirror is so great

that when the mirror refuses to respond, the subject might as well give up; 'she [...] ignored me for so long that I went back to bed' (p. 16).

The example which Jeanette's mother strives to be to her daughter affects everything they see. When evil is in danger of invading their house, in the form of a radio programme about snails, Jeanette's mother is horrified that her daughter might be about to experience something which does not fall under her control;

My mother shrieked.

"Did you hear that?" she demanded [...] "The family life of snails, it's an Abomination, it's like saying we come from monkeys." (p. 21)

The question urged by Jeanette's mother refers not only to whether or not Jeanette heard the announcement of the offending programme, but also to whether or not she understood correctly the significance of the utterance. In case the child did not hear the correct interpretation, in case she did not hear 'that [...] it's like saying we come from monkeys', her mother immediately supplies the way in which she has seen the programme, and the way in which she expects and requires Jeanette to see it. When Jeanette rejects her mother's interpretation, insisting that ' "it's not like that at all" ', her mother returns to her role as exemplary mirror, ensuring that Jeanette watches her as she 'fixed her gaze on the picture of the Lord hung about the oven' (p.22).

The fear of losing control is crucial at this point in the story, because this incident occurs on the night before Jeanette has to start school, a place her mother has kept her from for as long as possible because of her view of it as a 'Breeding Ground' (p. 16). Despite her mother's using this phrase as a warning, for Jeanette it signifies excitement and mystery, and this independent interpretation seems to promise a place where Jeanette will learn to be something other than the vision of her mother. And yet this does not happen; the forced identification has been so strong and effective that Jeanette sees no other way of being at school than of the image she has been

given; a missionary. After threatening the other primary school children with stories of hell and damnation, she is isolated and lonely, and becomes confirmed in her role;

It was obvious where I belonged. Ten more years and I could go to missionary school.  
(p. 42)

The separation from others becomes part of her identity, one which she shares with her mother;

My mother didn't have many friends either. People didn't understand the way she thought; neither did I, but I loved her because she always knew exactly why things happened. (p. 42)

Although Jeanette still fails to see things in precisely the way in which her mother sees them, she trusts her mother's vision, and is prepared to adopt it as her own. In this way her identity is totally inscribed on her mother's terms, through her mother's eyes.

Jeanette's struggle to understand the kind of subject position she occupies clearly differs from Esther's, because where Esther seeks harmony between her understanding of herself as subject and her understanding of herself as object, Jeanette seeks self knowledge through identification with her mother's vision of her. Esther strives to objectify herself in order to better see the kind of thing that she is, and she does this by focusing on the conditions of perception. Jeanette seeks herself as subject in the identity that her mother has created as an alternative future for her (the mother's) self, and she does this by focusing on that identity, and making it her own.

Yet when Jeanette does succeed in acquiring her own vision; when she does manage to see for herself, it will be neither on nor in her mother's terms. She notices activity on the margins, to which her mother is oblivious. This is conveyed comically in the early scene at church, where Pastor Finch's sermonizing on the spiritual weakness of women and children is accompanied by table thumping so emphatic that it

catapulted a cheese sandwich into the collection bag; I saw it happen, but I was so distracted I forgot to tell anyone. They found it in there the week after. (pp. 11-12)

Jeanette is capable of seeing beyond the blinkers which her mother has placed upon her. This is emphasized further when Jeanette, having been warned about 'Unnatural Passions' (p. 16), sees Melanie, who will become her first lover, working on a fish stall in the market;

Week after week I went back there, just to watch.  
Then one week she wasn't there any more.  
There was nothing I could do but stare and stare at the wheelks. (p. 80)

Melanie begins to attend church services, and in this sense to see the world as Jeanette and her mother see it. Yet it is through her relationship with Melanie that Jeanette will come to realize that she does not share her mother's vision. After the illicit affair is discovered, Jeanette purged and Melanie sent away, she begins to think about remarks her mother makes which she used to accept without question;

now I wasn't so easy [...] I used to imagine we saw things the same, but all the time we were on different planets. (p. 112)

This remark reveals that an awareness of the difference of vision has changed her as a person, specifically has made her more difficult. This recognition allows Jeanette to open her eyes even more. Jeanette's considerations of other possibilities in the novel may be represented by her watching another family through their sitting-room window (p. 131). The recognition that there are other ways of living enables Jeanette to choose her own vision, a world away from that of her mother's.

The independence of vision is stressed here, and the escape from her mother's way of seeing and thus knowing enables Jeanette to attain a freedom of identity. Yet Jeanette has difficulty understanding the differences of others' visions. When she meets Melanie, some years after their relationship is over, Jeanette is horrified at Melanie's inability to see her lover in the way she had when they were close;

she seemed to have forgotten everything. It made me want to [...] pull off all my clothes in the middle of the street and yell, "Remember this body?". (p. 166)



In this way Jeanette's understanding of herself, coming about through an expansion of vision, is contrasted with Melanie's closing off possibilities of vision, in order to make sense of her self. But it is not merely a case of Melanie having chosen a different way of seeing the past. In fact, Melanie's renouncing her experience with Jeanette is shown to rob her of her personhood. When Jeanette accidentally meets Melanie, years after their affair, she sees her as non-human, first animal (p. 121), then worse; '[I]f she had been serene to the point of bovine before, she was now almost vegetable' (p. 166).

Melanie's lack of personhood may be related to the fact that where Jeanette has freed herself from the illusion of the mirror as a way of seeing herself, and acknowledged her own role in constructing herself through life choices, Melanie thinks that she sees things just as they are, and mocks other possibilities;

she laughed and said that we probably saw what had happened very differently anyway...She laughed again, and said that the way I saw it would make a good story, her vision was just the history, the nothing-at-all facts. (p. 166)

Jeanette's "finding" herself, then, involves not only rejecting the mirror example and gaze of her mother which has been foisted upon her, but also rejecting the principle of mirror visions as illusory. The significance of Jeanette's ability to 'make a good story' is one which I will explore in due course.

The mirror image, then, plays an important part in each of the protagonists' explorations of self knowledge, and their attempts to find a subject position for themselves. Moreover, it reveals a potential in fiction for complexity with regard to this familiar image. The self examination it offers proves to be, for both Esther and Jeanette, enlightening not for any answers that it might provide, but rather for the way in which subjects can come to see themselves independently of an image which has been constructed of themselves. The traditional deployment of the mirror as an image which allows philosophers to ask "what if..." is not as helpful, because it ignores

ways in which the recognitions of and identifications with mirror images themselves affect our self knowledge. It is in this sense that philosophers lack the commitment of autographical writers. Autography, by combining commitment and specificity, employs the mirror image in a way which naturalizes its implications, but does not attempt to say that this is how it must be for everyone.

## 2. LISTENING TO THE SUBJECT

Language has been thought to be a definitive human trait. Along with rationality, it is what differentiates us from other species. Part of what it is to be a person is to be able to use language, and Popper and Eccles even suggest that 'only a human being capable of speech can reflect upon himself'.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, defenders of the genre of autobiography often emphasize the importance of language in self description. For example, autobiographical theorist Elizabeth Bruss has made interesting use of the philosophy of language, particularly Searle's notion of speech acts, to argue that the autobiographical act is fundamentally discursive.<sup>60</sup> Paul John Eakin similarly relates autobiographies to essentialist notions of a philosophy of speech by asserting that 'autobiographical discourse seems to be integral to personality', and even that in certain cases 'the autobiographical act functions symbolically as a second acquisition of language'.<sup>61</sup> Sidonie Smith also invokes a notion of 'talking back' to describe women writers of autobiography.<sup>62</sup> So one way in which philosophy has been applied, both explicitly and implicitly, to the theory of autobiography concerns the philosophy of language. Yet there is a risk of limitation here, in three specific senses.

<sup>59</sup> Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 144.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976)

<sup>61</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Fictions In Autobiography: Studies In the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 236-237.

<sup>62</sup> See Sidonie Smith, 'Who's Talking/ Who's Talking Back?: The Subject of Personal Narrative', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18:2 (1993), 392-407.

Firstly, the essentialist argument here may be reformulated to suggest that people are recognized and valued on the basis of their ability to be heard, problematically for women, who, in a patriarchal society, are assigned a role of silence. Smith's notion of talking back assigns to women an aberrant position which only makes sense as a response to patriarchal discourse. Secondly, to adopt a tradition which conceives the writing subject as the speaker and the reader as the hearer is to discount my arguments concerning the active reader. Thirdly, the application of speech act theory in particular to autographical texts suggests that these texts bring together speech and writing in presence, thus instigating the eternal return to the metaphysics of presence. The attempt to resurrect the myth of the metaphysics of presence in order to claim philosophical status for a literary genre is doubly mistaken, for not only is the myth philosophically flawed, but the valuing of writing as literature itself demonstrates this flaw.

In order to overcome such a system of limitation, this overly simple model may be rejected in favour of the incitement to read of feminist philosophical novels. I claim for autography a radical space which represents the self in modes of communication other than speaking. In the two autographical texts I have chosen, the idea of the self is sought and indicated in a wider sense of communication, which includes symbols of artificial communication, and the operation of the discourse of silence. These are ways of communicating with, not only the world, but also oneself.

In *The Bell Jar*, the success or failure of Esther to communicate with other people has been analysed at length. It has been argued that Esther's failure to connect, or have any meaningful relationship on any level with any other character in the book comes about as a result of her

active submission to the role traditionally ascribed to women in patriarchy.<sup>63</sup> It is true that Esther experiences increasing alienation from the other characters in her life, and that this is something which she often orchestrates. Yet I propose that this happens as a result of her attempts to conform to the traditional pattern of autobiographical writing. Often her distancing serves paradoxically as an attempt to get closer to others. She finds that the methods which others use to connect do not work for her at all. An example of this occurs when she visits Buddy's room. He has attempted a connection by suggesting that they examine each other naked. Esther, however, likens this to the humiliation of having the 'Posture Picture' taken for college files. Instead she

began to comb my hair down over my face so Buddy couldn't see it. Suddenly I said, "Have you ever had an affair with anyone, Buddy?". (pp. 71-2)

Since revealing her body has not appealed as a way to connect, she will try hiding it. This enables her to ask intimate questions in a new attempt to get closer to Buddy. Unfortunately, this also leads her to discover Buddy's hypocritical nature; she has connected, only to find that it is a connection she does not want. I have already suggested that a major part of Esther's melancholy arises from her failure to connect not with other people, but with herself. And I feel that when she does fail to connect with others, this is due to her own loss of a sense of self. In Esther's case, the self and other distinction is blurred as a result of her alienation from her own, particularly physical, self. As I have indicated, Esther repeatedly speaks of her mirror image as if it were other. Similarly, by combing her hair over her face, Esther tries to confront herself in isolation, and finds herself increasingly alienated from her own body. This alienation is also imaginatively presented in terms of the artificiality of communication.

An important example is the use of the telephone, particularly in chapter ten. Telephoning to cancel her summer housesharing arrangements, Esther notes that '[m]y voice sounded strange and hollow in my ears' (p. 124). From here on in, the voice is not part of her. Conversations

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<sup>63</sup> See for example Diane S. Bonds, 'The Separative Self In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*', *Women's Studies*, 18:1 (1990), 49-63.

are reported in the third person, where 'the hollow voice' speaks (p. 124), and Esther listens to 'the zombie voice leave a message' (p. 125). In colloquial terms, Esther has moved into autopilot, resisting any personal involvement with the outside world, including her active self. This trope might be seen as a technique for survival. The autopilot metaphor is useful here, since it implies a self-conscious and temporary shift to a specific type of coping mechanism, which is expected to be discarded in the near future. And in the near future, as the reader is aware, Esther will be able to write this autobiography, taking control by naming her pain.

In this section, Esther envisages parts of herself from which she is alienated as external from herself, in order to understand herself better. A similar process happens in *Oranges*, where Jeanette, in experiencing a crisis of identity, sees an orange demon. The church hierarchy has warned Jeanette that she has fallen prey to "Unnatural Passions" as a result of being possessed by demons. Jeanette begins to think this through;

I knew that demons entered wherever there was weak point. If I had a demon my weak point was Melanie, but she was beautiful and good and had loved me.  
Can love really belong to the demon? (pp. 105-6)

This blurring of the line between what counts as good and what bad is confusing, but Jeanette is able to make her own judgement upon that which the church are trying to destroy;

If they want to get at my demon they'll have to get at me [...]  
If I let them take away my demons, I'll have to give up what I've found. (p. 106)

Here Jeanette moves directly from an assertion of her sexuality as part of herself, to a recognition of her own power to keep or give up that part of herself. As Jeanette begins to acknowledge and support her demon, it literally appears, asking to be understood as a 'different, and difficult' part of her (p. 106). They then have a discussion with regard to her options as to whether or not she should be exorcised of this difference and difficulty. This may be understood as a particularly poignant case of Jeanette listening to herself, and simultaneously, creating herself.

The traditional conception of speech indicating personhood can only have a monolithic view of silence, regarding it as self effacing and self denying.<sup>64</sup> In both of the texts which I have chosen to examine, silence is figured in a far more complex way.

Both Jeanette and Esther experience moments when they are isolated from the sounds of the rest of the world. In *Oranges*, for example, Jeanette tells the story of how she once

went deaf for three months with my adenoids: [...] I was lying in bed one night, thinking about the glory of the Lord, when it struck me that life had gone very quiet. (p. 22)

The silence lasts for three months because Jeanette's oblivion is interpreted unreasonably as religious piety. It shouldn't surprise us at this stage to learn that Jeanette and her mirror mother respond in the same way;

I had assumed myself to be in a state of rapture, not uncommon in our church, and later I discovered my mother had assumed the same. (p. 23)

The suggestion that Jeanette's symptoms are a common occurrence 'in our church' might be seen as an attempt to present the assumption of Jeanette and her mirror mother as reasonable. Yet the other church members seem surprised, concerned, and even, in the case of Miss Jewsbury, horrified at the notion that Jeanette's temporary disability may be taken as the Lord's work (p. 23; p. 25). Here Jeanette and her mother are sharing a narrow perspective, and so emphasizing Jeanette's dependence on her mother. Because the story is told from the point of view of Jeanette as she was then, the conviction of interpretation in her mother's vision is presented, but the alternative view, of Miss Jewsbury and the others, is there for the reader to pick up on. In other words, the reader is offered a freedom to understand both Jeanette and her story independently and creatively.

The passive silence of the outside world is translated by Jeanette's mother into an active conspiracy of silence towards her daughter. All communication is denied to her, as her mother

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<sup>64</sup> See for example Eakin's examination of Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography *The Woman Warrior* (Eakin, pp. 255-275).

spreads the word that she is not to be spoken to in her 'state of rapture'. Now, not only is Jeanette unable to speak for herself, even in her mother's voice, but also no one will even speak to her. For Jeanette, silence is reflective, invoking once more the mirror image.

The silence experienced by Jeanette is described as most distressing at the time. Perhaps the most distressing thing is that it shatters two illusions of Jeanette's life; firstly that her mother has the answer to everything, and secondly that the church is a bedrock of certainty. Having found these notions to be mistaken, Jeanette responds positively with the assertion that 'I had to find out for myself' (p. 24). The experience of silence then, enforces isolation, but it is an isolation which enables Jeanette to look into and from herself for explanations, allowing her to break free from the easy certainty within which she had been heretofore confined. Refusing such certainty goes on to become the theme of Jeanette's self, demonstrated in a later scene when her mother tries to prevent Jeanette from hearing something which she does not want her to hear, by

rushing to put her hands over my ears.

"Get off," I yelled. [...]

I bit my mother's hand. "Let go of my ears, I can hear it too. (p. 52)

Jeanette is beginning to resist the way in which the world is selectively exposed to her through her mother.

In contrast with Jeanette's extended period of sound deprivation, Esther's experience of silence in *The Bell Jar* lasts only a moment. Yet it is also a crucial moment in the protagonist's search for a subject position. The positioning of the moment itself seems significant, as it is placed immediately after Esther's attempts to look at and for herself in the elevator mirror, and immediately before her experience with the dressing table mirror. Sandwiched between these two mirror moments, it appears as an alternative method of introspection, a specific case of



listening to oneself. In her hotel room, Esther is 'furious' that 'they had the windows fixed so you couldn't really open them and lean out'. Instead,

standing at the left side of the window and laying my cheek to the woodwork [...] I could see the moving red and white lights along the drive and the lights of the bridges whose names I didn't know. (pp. 19-20)

Listening without hearing, watching without knowing, Esther begins to focus on these failures as ones of her own making.

The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence. I knew perfectly well the cars were making a noise, and the people in them [...] were making a noise, [...] but I couldn't hear a thing. The city hung in my window, flat as a poster, glittering and blinking, but it might just as well not have been there at all, for all the good it did me. (p. 20)

This is the effect of the bell jar, whose captive is aware of the goings on outside it, but can do nothing to access it. This silence indicates Esther's lack of a social being, her failure to connect with the world around her, as recommended by Gusdorf. And yet, the fact that this is revealed in writing would also appear to be significant exception to such a failure. An autobiography represents the ideal opportunity to speak of silence because it can offer two levels of discourse. This is clearly demonstrated in *The Bell Jar*, where Esther finds herself unable to enter some kinds of autobiographical discourse, yet is able to describe this inability to the reader; the story continues to be told. There is discourse at the level of narration, and discourse which may be described as being at the level of the text. In the first case, the reader is offered a picture of how Esther felt at a point in the past. In the second, s/he is made aware of the construction of this past brought about by the desire to tell it as a story. The simultaneous presence of these two voices in *The Bell Jar* means that Esther can speak of silence, and of her feelings about it; for example that it 'depressed' her. The use of the past tense here confirms the momentary nature of the occasion, and so paradoxically indicates a future (or for the narrator, present) moment when silence will be recognized as something positive.

This silence, then, will become a way for Esther to understand her self. Jeanette's silence can also work in this way. For example, after the visit from the orange demon, Jeanette makes the decision to continue her life as a lesbian, and also to continue her membership of the homophobic church in which she was brought up. The former must remain a silent part of her life, in order that she may get what she wants from both. Indeed, for some time she negotiates the balance quite successfully; as May says, '[s]he's lost none of her gifts, has she?' (p. 112). The important point here is that Jeanette makes the choice of strategic silence, which contrasts with her earlier absolute silence which signified illness, and lack of control, and which had an isolating effect. Now Jeanette is able to decide who to tell herself to, as for example at the end of the novel when she returns to her hometown and realizes that Betty 'didn't know who I was, and I didn't want to talk about it' (p. 164). Here the discourse of silence is not self effacing, nor a simple marking of trauma to be overcome by the speaking subject. Rather it signifies a stance adopted in order to achieve a desired subject position. It is a creative discursive strategy of self knowledge.

### 3. THINKING (FOR) MYSELF

This section does not represent a return to the metaphysical atomism of the cogito, since Esther has already progressed beyond dualistic thought in self definition, and Jeanette's story begins with a definition of herself in someone else's terms. It does, however, represent an indication that the content of my thoughts goes some way towards establishing the kind of subject position which I occupy.

In the case of *The Bell Jar*, I will attempt to demonstrate this in connection with the topic of last section, since I am interested in those moments where the text separates what the

protagonist thinks from what she says she thinks. An interesting example occurs during the *Ladies Day* dinner, when Betsy asks Esther why she did not appear at the day's event. Esther tells her

"I wanted to go to the fur show, but Jay Cee called up and made me come into the office." That wasn't quite true about wanting to go to the show, but I tried to convince myself now that it was true. (p. 30)

Reeling back to the phone call from Jay Cee, Esther recalls her response, in order to give Betsy a full account;

I said meekly, "I thought I was going to the fur show". Of course I hadn't thought any such thing, but I couldn't figure out what else to say.  
 "I told her I thought I was going to the fur show," I said to Betsy. "But she told me to come into the office [...]"  
 [...] I felt a bit awkward about the tears, but they were real enough. (p. 32)

The repetition of the phrase 'I thought I was going to the fur show' initially suggests some continuation of the thoughts and motivations of the protagonist both during the telephone conversation, and at dinner. That this continuum is a construct is clear from the three separate meanings which the phrase includes here; one, as it is 'meekly' spoken to Jay Cee as a token "something to say"; another, as told to Betsy, accompanied by tears, as a sincere wish negated by Jay Cee's demand that she work instead; and yet another, as told to the reader. This final option suggests the possibility that the knowledge of the switch which Esther is able to make reveals her capacity to invent herself in the terms of the past, but according to the needs of the present.

One way of defining oneself socially is in the process of naming. What I am called distinguishes me as an individual, and makes myself and others aware of me as that individual. There is interesting play on names in both of the given novels. As autobiography, neither texts simply assume the name of the author. This is a warning sign from the beginning that nothing will be quite straightforward or simple here. In *The Bell Jar*, the protagonist does not offer her name in the narrative until page twelve, when, asked by a date, she replies,

"My name's Elly Higginbottom," I said. [...] After that I felt safer. I didn't want anything I said or did that night to be associated with me and my real name. (p. 12)

Her immediate confidence to the reader that this is not her real name serves to distinguish two states. I have already indicated that there are two levels of discourse, one at narrative and one at textual level. Here there are also two selves; a retrospective self and an active one. These are also separated by time, in the sense that one is living the story, and the other is telling the lived story.

When Esther writes her autography, Plath's autographical act is projected further, with the author's decision that

My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing. (pp. 126-127)

This code of disguise might be seen as no coincidence, but rather a very carefully designed connection. The close examination of the words of the novel reveal their importance for the protagonist, but also leave the reader counting the letters in "Sylvia", and pondering further connections.<sup>65</sup>

So much for Esther's name. But what of naming others? She says 'I collected men with interesting names' (p. 53). This may represent her conscious attempt to manipulate men, if only in her imagination. This attitude offers an insight into Esther's protectiveness of her own name. Other people knowing your name gives them power over you; and ironically hands them the opportunity to ignore your status as individual, and instead lump you together with others, as an item to be amassed. It is also something which separates Esther's present self from her past self. Collecting would seem to be an ongoing activity. Speaking of oneself having 'collected' in the past seems to position such activity in terms of a phase or a fad; almost as if

<sup>65</sup> Such a connection was also apparent in the first version of *The Bell Jar*, which Plath published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1962, and whose protagonist was called Virginia. See Plath's final typescript prior to publication, p. 129. The reduction from eight letter names to six letter names in the 1963 edition facilitates an extension of the chain of autographical connection to Plath, who came out as the author in this version.

she has failed and given up in her token effort to have some control over men. In *Oranges*, the author offers her first name, but readers are given no clue as to the latter. When Winterson adapted the novel for television, the protagonist's name is changed to Jess, but still any sign of a surname is omitted. This might be seen as a reference to Jeanette's adoption. Jeanette has no family name because she feels as if she has no family. Yet it is also a defensive strategy, revealed by the story of Winnet, who refuses to tell the magician her name because like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, she knows that this information will give him power over her (pp. 138-9). Remaining anonymous also allows Jeanette, like Frankenstein's creature, to be independent of atavistic ties, free to define and create herself.

Jeanette's mother is given neither first name nor surname in the novel, but rather is referred to as 'my mother', a reference which contributes to Jeanette's anonymity, whilst allowing the daughter, the writer and intertext Jeanette, to remain in control of the narrative. The mother is also shown to create for herself two nicknames, 'the Jesus Belle' (p. 35), as she says she was called by the clientele of public houses while she attempted to convert them to the faith, and 'Kindly Light' (p. 171), her CB handle or codename. This emphasizes the significance of stories in the text, but also serves to subjugate the mother's stories to Jeanette's, since the mother character is now primarily defined in the terms of the story told by Jeanette. It is perhaps appropriate that Jeanette should be refusing to see this woman as an individual except in relation to Jeanette herself, thus reversing the relationship they had at the time of the events of the autobiography. And yet this has the unfortunate result of Jeanette asserting her own individuality at the expense of another's.

Another example of this use of names to make an autobiographical point occurs in the dedication of the novel, which reads 'TO PHILLIPA BREWSTER WHO WAS THE BEGINNING' (p. [v]). Understanding the text as an autobiography facilitates the consideration of this remark as

more than mere formal baggage of publication. One possible reading is of this as a reference to an historical correspondent to the character in the novel called Melanie, Jeanette's first lover, who regrets their affair and, the reader is given to understand, wishes to forget all about it. This creates another story for the reader of *Oranges*; like counting the letters in Plath's first name, s/he can speculate on the possible motives and effects of such a dedication.

Throughout *The Bell Jar* Esther creates a series of fictional selves in order to ease her interaction with the outside world. Her alter ego, Elly Higginbottom is eventually made into a rounded character as an orphan from Chicago, and other stereotypes are invoked which work against the reader's understanding of Esther. For example, after discovering Buddy's sexual history, she rejects thoughts of loving and marrying him and decides to look for a casual partner of her own. When she realizes that one man on whom she has set her sights is not interested, she displaces rejection by writing to tell him that 'I was unfortunately about to marry a childhood sweetheart' (p. 83). Esther's autographical story of 'Elaine' marks the move to another stage in the process of self invention.

These attempts at self fabrication function in the text as bids on the part of the protagonist to control what she is known as. This becomes most clear at those moments in the text where she presents her self to the sailor and the doctor, both of whom she is meeting for the first time, and both of whom seek not to know her as an individual, but rather to fit her into the function of a straightforwardly sexual or medical object. This connection is drawn in the text as the episode with the sailor is followed immediately by the doctor's voice asking ' "Well, Esther, how do you feel this week?" ' (p. 142).

This juxtaposition emphasizes the privileged role of the reader. Esther allows the two men to believe that they have an acute understanding of her, and in so doing, retains her own sense of

her self. The reader is allowed insight into all of these exchanges, without being offered any promises - as Esther says, '[i]f you expect nothing from somebody you are never disappointed' (p. 62) - and yet whilst it would be going too far to say that readers as a result understand Esther's subject position, certainly it seems to be the case that we are offered a more full and complex context for the experiences she describes.

The capacity for creative self awareness also may be said to have feminist motivations; 'I couldn't stand the idea of a woman having to have a single pure life' (p. 85). Esther rejects the pictures of her future self which are offered literally by Mrs. Willard (p. 87), and imaginatively by Constantin (p. 88). Ultimately, this rejection is indicated by the text itself. Having decided to write a novel, she concludes '[t]hat would fix a lot of people' (p.126). In this way Esther emphasizes the radical power in showing her capacity to invent and express her self, rather than simply accepting images offered of a Gusdorfian 'single pure life'. That the desire for self invention may be realized by producing a text represents an exciting prospect, and accordingly Esther insists that 'I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters' (p. 79).

So in *The Bell Jar*, an expression of Esther's self is achieved paradoxically through deception, and the struggle to present herself as something which she is not. Predictably, in *Oranges*, the world is presented by Jeanette's mother's teaching from scripture and seed packet, and by her telling of stories. Their regular walks together follow a predictable pattern culminating in her mother's storytelling. Jeanette, readers are told, was always placed in the role of listener, and the stories were instructive, invariably

about a brave person who had despised the fruits of the flesh and worked for the Lord instead. (p. 7)

Jeanette's mother has made of her life such a story, and so autographical stories are included as part of the teaching. But the teaching is selective, and to fill in the gaps Jeanette begins to read the pages in the Bible which her mother glosses over (p. 41), and to ask about the picture of a



woman in the album of her mother's past lovers (p. 36). A more earth-shattering moment comes when Jeanette finds out that the story of *Jane Eyre* which her mother has read to her is a distortion of Charlotte Brontë's novel;

I found out, that dreadful day in a back corner of library, that Jane doesn't marry St John at all, that she goes back to Mr Rochester. (p. 73)

This is all the more worrying, because Jane's story of her life was to count as an example for Jeanette to apply herself. Her mother's distorted version of the story has Jane marrying and becoming a missionary, fulfilling the two types of womanhood which she wishes to see in her daughter. Jeanette finds out that the story - her story - is not what she had been told it was, and compares this to her discovery of her adoption papers, revealing that the story of where she has come from was as (un)fixed as the story of where she is going (p. 73).

Jeanette is to tell her own stories. She will find her self initially by following the example of her mirror mother, and then by rejecting it, and instead embracing the pleasures of the flesh. She begins, then, by telling the reader that one of her mother's story-telling techniques was to 'start to tell me a story and then go on to something else in the middle' (p. 16), and shortly after proceeds to do exactly this with her own story, making the Proustian move from a pyjama top which hurts her ears to the story of her adenoid related illness (pp. 22-23). Thus Jeanette's storytelling begins by following a familiar pattern whereby '[m]y mother sang the tune, and I put in the harmonies' (p. 51).

In order to move on from this restrictive duet, Jeanette must learn to read for herself.

Ironically, this is something which her mother's teachings have encouraged. Jeanette is taught by her mother that an objective truth is to be made specially available to her. Although this truth is presented initially in terms of her mother's stories, Jeanette is made aware that the purpose of this teaching is that she may herself 'interpret the signs and wonders that the unbeliever might never understand' (p. 17). Jeanette's is the medium's role, making the truth

clearer to others. A expression of Jeanette's confidence in her interpretations is evident when at primary school she tells her teacher '[j]ust because you can't tell what it is, doesn't mean it's not what it is' (p. 43). The power of her mind is similarly emphasized by Elsie, who proposes another notion, that of a liberating radical freedom;

"If you think about something for long enough," she explained, "more than likely, that thing will happen." She tapped her head. "It's all in the mind." (p. 30)

Elsie unwittingly helps Jeanette to value herself, that she might start to recognize her own part in the world. She will see that the truth lies within herself, as both actor and agent. Jeanette realizes that she must make sense of the world, and that she needs to do this for herself, not for others. In this way truth is revealed not as a relative notion, but rather as a subjective notion. For although Jeanette is to learn that truth is not absolute, she will also see that it is not dependent on context; in this sense, truth is dependent on the individual to make it true. Or, as the fairy story at the end of the 'Leviticus' chapter demonstrates, 'perfection is not to be found, but to be fashioned' (p. 63).

In *Oranges* the struggle of the protagonist to communicate truth is demonstrated through her slowly acquiring the ability to tell her own stories. That Jeanette moves beyond her mother's restrictive storytelling strategies is indicated in the text by the appearance of the daughter's own narratives. The possibility of constructing such narratives is offered for the first time at school, that place from where her mother wanted to keep her, as Jeanette is asked to write an essay entitled ' "What I Did in my Summer Holidays" ' (p. 37). Similarly, at the church nativity, Jeanette is excited at the prospect of playing the narrator (p. 40). Perhaps the most significant demonstration of Jeanette's role as storyteller occurs in the construction of *Oranges* itself, as fantastic fairy tales are woven into the basic autographical narrative to represent this new voice. These stories can be used to make sense of the life events which appear in the basic narrative. For example, the tale of the princess who takes the place of the wise woman as village counsellor follows the description of Jeanette's relationship with her mother. Jeanette's

time at school is her first experience of a perspective other than that of her mother and the church. She finds that she can overcome confusion by fusing the two perspectives with a story; the story of the Emperor Tetrahedron (p. 47-48). Towards the end of the novel, the stories also begin to interact with Jeanette's story, for example with the story of the pebble, which she carries around as a token of hope, and which Winnet is given by the magician to draw a protective circle around herself (p. 139).

As a result, the two levels of discourse which were apparent in *The Bell Jar* are also to be found in *Oranges*. The story of Jeanette as her mother's vision is related, but also disrupted by stories which exist outside the mother mirror, created by Jeanette to make sense of her self independently of her mother. Increasing in complexity and vision, and in their relationship to the main narrative, these stories stand as evidence that Jeanette has fully absorbed and adopted creatively, Elsie's belief in epistemological value of stories. Yet it is not to be assumed that Elsie simply replaces Jeanette's mother in influence and identity - for even the belief is expressed in Jeanette's own words; '[s]he said stories helped you to understand the world' (p. 29). It would seem from this that stories have also been instrumental in helping Jeanette to understand the world, and that she is prepared to acknowledge where this message has come from, whilst still attempting to make it her own. The protagonist eventually realizes that she can make even more sense of everything she encounters by formulating a story of her self.

In both novels then, thought is represented as a tool which enables one to see a subject position, but also facilitates the creation of a subject position. And the autograph is the story of a simultaneous reading and writing of the self. In this way, both *The Bell Jar* and *Oranges* demonstrate that the production of the autograph is part of what makes it philosophical.

## **Conclusion**

I have shown that the genre of autobiography has philosophical potential, and demonstrated this through analysis of some of the philosophical issues connected with the self which I find in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. I have shown that part of the reason for my considering their qualities to be feminist philosophical is because they present pictures of selves which are inclusive not as a result of attempting to speak for everyone, but precisely by offering readers the freedom to identify if they wish with that picture, and to reject it if not. This empowerment of the reader is an important and significant contribution to be made to philosophy, and it can be learnt, I have argued, from the novel perspectives of feminism and literature. The incitement to read is a strong one. In my next chapter I will go on to examine the philosophical possibilities of feminist utopian fiction, exchanging a confession of knowledge of my subject position for an exploration of otherness.

## Chapter Three

### Philosophical Utopian Fiction

It flashed through her like the suddenly apprehended solution of a problem [...] and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked.  
George Eliot<sup>1</sup>

This chapter on utopian fiction will continue the pattern of finding philosophical potential in the specific instances of the genre in order to demonstrate that such potential may be discovered more generally. Once again, I will argue that the traditional conception of the genre is anti-philosophical, and that feminist critics have perpetuated this conception in spite of, and often because of, their take on the genre. I will attempt to reclaim the genre of utopian fiction for the purposes of a feminist philosophical interpretation, and in the process redefine it.

This chapter represents the second instalment of my philosophical story, which follows the confession of self representation with an exploration of how to conceive otherness. In this sense I offer an expanded and developed position on the notion of the other-worldliness of utopian novels. This development will focus here on the traditional analytic philosophical topic of “the problem of other minds”.<sup>2</sup> The perspective of utopian fiction may explore this, I will argue, from a perspective of possibility which contrasts with the traditional skeptical starting point of analytic philosophy. The philosophical possibilities of this genre will be outlined with specific reference to Sally Miller Gearhart’s *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women*, and Marge Piercy’s *Woman On the Edge of Time*.

In recognition of the fact that these two texts constitute paradigm cases of the genre, I will refer to them throughout as texts which any generic analysis must account for.

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill On the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting introductory discussion of this problem see Paul Ziff, Alvin Plantinga and Sydney Shoemaker, ‘Symposium: The Other Minds Problem’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 20:62 (1965), 575-589.

## **A. Coming To Terms With Utopia**

Unlike autobiography or detective fiction, utopia is a genuinely interdisciplinary notion. It may be examined in terms of the studies of anthropology, historiography, literature, political science, sociology, all with equal viability. As a literary genre, however, utopian writing has been frequently dismissed, and habitually ignored. I will begin this section by examining such a dismissal, before going on to look at the ways in which utopias have been reclaimed by literary theorists. I will argue that literary conceptions of utopia have been problematically dominated by the way in which connections to politics have been conceived by literary theorists, and that such limited conceptions lead to difficulties in making philosophical connections, as I understand them.

Utopian fiction is a sub-genre of science or speculative fiction. It might seem sensible, therefore, to look to this parent genre for a definition of utopias;

*u/ to/ pi/ as* - situations of social perfection. Early science fiction featured many utopias [...] but they declined in number because the twentieth century became grimmer and because a true utopia lacks the dramatic tension necessary for entertaining fiction.<sup>3</sup>

Here, utopian fiction is pictured as a kind of poor relation - even under-developed early ancestor - of science fiction literature. Its sister form, dystopian fiction, does not even merit a mention in this otherwise valuable science fiction dictionary. In order to discuss utopian science fiction with any seriousness, as well as justifying it as, at the very least, 'entertaining fiction', I will reject this negative, dismissive attitude to the genre - hereafter referred to as the derisory definition. In particular, I begin by questioning the simplistic summary of utopias in literature as 'situations of social perfection', as well as the accusation that they 'lack [...] dramatic tension' and so fail as literature. Furthermore, I will go on to argue that this definition operates under two serious misconceptions about the genre. The first of these

<sup>3</sup> *Science Fiction A to Z: A Dictionary of the Great S. F. Themes*, ed. by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 557.

misconceptions is that utopian novels have a close, necessary, and limiting relationship to an identifiable or actual political climate. The second, that it is advisable, even possible, to seal off the genre of utopian fiction as a period piece. I will attempt to show that problems associated with these misconceptions, specifically investments in the structure and logic of binary oppositions, constitute significant barriers to a philosophical conception of the genre of utopian fiction.

## 1. PERFECTION WITHOUT TENSION

The notion that literary utopias describe 'situations of social perfection' may be clarified with reference back to the mythical origins of the genre. Utopia found its name in 1516, when Thomas More published his text bearing that very title.<sup>4</sup> More combined two Greek words; *eu topos*, meaning good place, and *ou topos*, meaning no place. Taking More's text as a model, the two senses may be combined by utopian theorists to suggest an image of a place so good that it could not possibly exist. Under this view, utopias in fiction are completely insipid, and represent some kind of impossible dream world. This is arguably the way in which the notion of utopia has entered popular discourse. It is a description of paradise, a dream which allows for an escape from the mundane reality of our lives. This conception of utopia in fiction opposes ideality to reality, and so conforms to a highly traditional view of literature as a description of that which is unreal.

An acceptance of the derisory definition's emphasis on utopia as an ideal, unreal world allows Ann Lane to say, in an introduction to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's utopian novel *Herland*;

Most utopias create worlds that are elevating but bland, a paradise without sparkle.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. by Paul Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Ann J. Lane, 'Introduction' to *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (London: Women's Press, 1979), pp. v-xxiii (p. xiii). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.



Here, the simplicity and banality of the texts which populate the genre is posited as something from which this novel, if its artistry is to be defended, must be protected. Something which *Herland* is to be valued for, apparently, is that it 'soars' above the genre (p. xiii).

One way of overcoming the simplistic view of the derisory definition that utopias depict situations of social perfection is to formalize the diversity of the texts which make up the genre. For example, Lyman Tower Sargent has represented the complexity of utopian fiction in terms of four different categories of utopia; eutopia, utopia, dystopia, and utopian satire.<sup>6</sup> In a classificatory sense, Sargent's structure may prove useful. Yet there are probably few works which will fit one of these categories in any strict sense, and so they also involve simplification. As Dingbo Wu has clearly shown, More's novel itself combines at least three of Sargent's types.<sup>7</sup> The separation of the genre into specific categories follows the reductionist logic of the derisory definition, and so retains its restrictions.

A division which has seemed more straightforward, and so has been commonplace in criticism is the distinction between utopia and dystopia, where the former means simply "good place", and the latter "bad place". Krishan Kumar's use of the terms utopia and anti-utopia demonstrates the overt invocation of binary oppositions, because it seems to define dystopia in terms of whatever utopia is not. Kumar begins by posing questions for himself which position the two ideas in opposing corners of an other-worldly boxing ring;

just who are the angels and who the devils in the conflict between utopia and anti-utopia [?] [...] has [utopia] survived the battering of the anti-utopia?<sup>8</sup>

Later, the threat posed by anti-utopias is pictured in Freudian terms;

As nightmare to its dream, like a malevolent and grimacing *doppelgänger*, anti-utopia has stalked utopia from the very beginning. (p. 99)

<sup>6</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *British and American Utopian Literature, 1516-1985: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography* (London: Garland, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Dingbo Wu, 'Understanding Utopian Literature', *Extrapolation*, 34:3 (1993), 230-244.

<sup>8</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia In Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. ix. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

The resulting genre can be entertainingly susceptible to changes of mind. That is, until the black and white are drawn back to their respective corners once more;

[f]rom the late nineteenth-century onwards, the negative and positive poles of the old satirical utopia were pulled apart and assigned to separate genres or sub-genres.  
(p. 125)

Kumar laments this development, but refuses to recognize that his own theorizing plays a crucial part in such assignations. In addition, his version of the distinction between utopia and anti-utopia, like the derisory definition, employs the terminology of perfection. Where utopia may be said to be '*perfect*, in the moral sense', its negative counterpart anti-utopia describes a world which has been '*perfected*, in the social sense' (p. 125, author's italics). This distinction reveals the way in which the erection of binary oppositions is addictive, and suggests that suspicions of neat categories are often well founded. For example, the difference between social and moral is by no means a clear one, and Kumar's apparent assumption that a line may be drawn between the two is philosophically naive. Similarly, the difference between a situation's being perfect and its being perfected is an odd one. Presumably, it means that the latter has been made perfect, where the former's perfection is *a priori*. This recalls for me St. Augustine's distinction between the city of God, which is heavenly, and the city of Man, which must perforce be full of sin.<sup>9</sup> In both cases the possibilities of human creation are given wholly negative associations. Kumar extends this notion even further with a subsequent distinction between the ideality of utopia, and the 'tyranny of the *idea*' which characterizes anti-utopia (p. 125, author's italics).

At the same time, the division is one between stasis and process. The tenses of 'perfect' and 'perfected' here are informative; the latter is positioned in time, where the former exists outside time. The effect becomes clearer with the distinction between the ideal, which exists

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by John Healey (London: Dent, 1931). See esp. book 2, chap. 7, where Augustine argues that philosophy is dangerously hubristic insofar as those who take it seriously fail to recognize that the texts of philosophy '*bear no divine authority*', but rather are 'the inventions of man' (p. 54-55, author's italics).

independently of people and society, and the idea, which symbolizes intellectual and, crucially, philosophical development. Complicity with the derisory definition, then, allows Kumar to posit utopia transcendentally as a society which “just is”, where the negativity of dystopia is captured in the fact of its being constructed, in its very historicity.

Kumar’s position on this unites his meaning with his method. For the very invocation of binary oppositions, in imposing an automated selection of alternatives, prohibits the free creative and imaginative thinking which I wish to locate as philosophical. The reasons for this prohibition are suggested by Nancy Jay, who cites three logical principles upon which binary oppositions are parasitic;

the Principle of Identity (if anything is A, it is A); the Principle of Contradiction (nothing can be both A and Not A); and the Principle of the Excluded Middle (anything, and everything, must be *either* A *or* Not-A).<sup>10</sup>

The necessities invoked by the two latter principles are not, I suggest, conducive to philosophical thinking, because they effect a programme whereby options are static, determined and confined, whilst the notions they attempt to describe are not. As a result of this disparity, binary oppositions inevitably have ‘distorting effects’ (p. 49).

Some feminist theorists have located the danger of binary oppositions in the fact of their being essentially evaluative; one side of the opposition must be good, and the other bad.<sup>11</sup> As such, utopian theory may be said to exclude the feminist as well as the philosophical whenever it assumes that utopia is as good as dystopia is bad. Ironically, feminist critics of the genre themselves take this risk when they succumb to the temptation to translate utopia and anti-utopia directly into feminist and anti-feminist, or to identify the difference between utopian and dystopian literature as one of diametrically opposing power relations, where the former are

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Jay, ‘Gender and Dichotomy’, *Feminist Studies*, 7:1 (1981), 38-56 (p. 42). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Hélène Cixous, ‘Sorties’, trans. by Ann Liddle, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Harvester Press, 1981), pp. 90-98.

matriarchies, and the latter patriarchies. For example, a belief in the notion that utopia and dystopia are logical contradictories leads Elaine Hoffman Baruch to say that 'dystopia for men may be utopia for women and *vice-versa*'.<sup>12</sup>

This version of dichotomous analysis poses a difficulty for utopian theorists who wish to adopt some version of the derisory definition as I have presented it, because it raises the issue of relativity with regard to perfection. Or, as Robert Nozick's individualist agenda allows him confidently (and perhaps accurately) to assert; 'the best of all possible worlds for me will not be that for you'.<sup>13</sup> Those who have been suspicious of utopian thinking have often pointed to its totalitarian tendencies in writers who have created ideal worlds founded on hierarchies, and so designed only for the few, yet dependent on the services of the many.<sup>14</sup> The apparent paternalism of a genre which seems to insist upon saying "this is what is good for you" poses a serious problem for feminist critics concerned with women writers of a type of fiction which has been male-dominated for much of its history. I contend that a simple reversal of power relationships depicted in utopian fiction does not constitute a solution to this problem, because it perpetuates the structure of binary oppositions.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the way in which the derisory definition reduces political complexities to simple alternatives is politically problematic even, perhaps especially, when it is adopted by feminist critics. This latter displays a tendency to convert binarism to separatism, and so conform to the restrictions of all three Principles outlined by Jay, without explicitly citing them.

The separatist approach undermines the genre's own aims of possibility. The bleak suggestion harboured specifically by Baruch's distinction is that men and women are ideologically

<sup>12</sup> Elaine Hoffman Baruch, 'Visions of Utopia: Introduction', in *Women In Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers*, ed. by Ruby Rohrlich and Elaine Hoffman Baruch (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), pp. 203-208 (p. 203, author's italics).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, [1975]), p. 298.

<sup>14</sup> See for example K. R. Popper's critique of Plato's *Republic* in the first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), which bears the volume title *The Spell of Plato*.

<sup>15</sup> The reactionary nature of such a move is highlighted by Luce Irigaray who says that the attempt 'simply to reverse the order of things' is always a mistake because 'even supposing this to be possible, history would repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness: to phallocratism', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 33.

incompatible; their social interests and desires diametrically opposed to one another.

Significantly, this means that feminism has nothing to offer to men. Yet this is the view of the patriarch; that the sexes are inevitably involved in a power struggle, where one must dominate the other. Like Plato's banishment of literature from the world of philosophy in order to save the latter from the threat of the former, this can only lead to a hopeless exclusion, which counts as neither an ideological nor an artistic solution.

More specifically, there is a sense of hopelessness about the suggestion that women cannot possibly live as equals with men, and so that any vision of a just society for women must exclude them. It is a formula for despair, paradoxically produced by the very attempt to envisage a situation of social perfection. As such, separatism fails to be utopian as much as it fails to be feminist, because utopian ideas are fundamentally optimistic, and visionary. And so, drawing together feminism and utopia may involve insisting that feminist movements represent a progression for men as well as women, and that the visions thus produced will benefit more from a displacement, rather than a reinforcement, of binary oppositions such as transcendent and historic, utopia and dystopia, matriarchy and patriarchy, good and bad, and even male and female.

As the derisory definition itself suggests, any strict division between utopia and dystopia is also aesthetically problematic. The blandness of perfection resists not just dramatic tension but also aesthetic interest. One way I see towards overcoming this problem is to insist that utopian fiction includes dystopia and its opposite eutopia. The two latter terms may be used as shorthand to refer to, respectively, the depiction of socio-political systems which are comparatively negative, and the depiction of those which are comparatively positive, where the comparison is a crucial part of the way in which each term is understood. In this way utopia as a genre may be separated from the associations of an absolute value laden interpretation.

Hopefully, as a result of this separation, it will become impossible to speak, as the derisory definition does, of a 'true utopia'. This is a good thing because critical emphasis on a simplistic, ideal eutopia, opposed to an equally simplistic dystopia, is, in political and aesthetic terms, unreal, unhelpful, and undesirable.

The derisory definition fails to account for the two utopian novels which I have chosen to focus upon. Piercy's novel *Woman On the Edge of Time* (hereafter, *WET*) resists the origins of the genre by separating out the two ideas, of good place and no place, which are embedded in More's invented word. Here, existence is a good, and it is only when Connie is stuck between the two worlds of present dystopia and future eutopia, in outopia, that she feels truly desperate;

For a long nauseated moment she blurred over and she was no place, lost, terrified.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the fact that *WET* is usually considered a paradigm case of a utopian novel, the traditional depiction of the future good place, Mattapoisett, takes up less than a third of the novel, with most of the work concerned with representations of what might be described as typical dystopian worlds. Piercy's novel includes an alternative future to Mattapoisett; a typical dystopian industrialized hierarchical society, set in New York City (pp. 287-301). Moreover, the present is, for the protagonist, a kind of living hell. Connie's poverty-stricken life outside the hospital, and then the misery of life as a prisoner inside, are fundamentally dystopian.

Neither are the different worlds distinct. The novel plays with the supposed oppositions between dystopia and eutopia throughout the novel. The transition to the utopian world in *WET* is effected, as suggested in the title, by the protagonist. The people in the future world who contact Connie frequently urge her to bring about change from the dystopia of her present to the eutopia of her future. Yet this incitement is most vague, and it is not only clear

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<sup>16</sup> Marge Piercy, *Woman On the Edge of Time* (London: Women's Press, 1980), p. 126. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

throughout that any decision to act must be made by Connie herself, but also that the decision as to what to do is hers. Agency, then, is foregrounded, contrary to Kumar's Augustinian prescriptions. Indeed, perfection may be said to be ultimately denied, as the ending of the novel leaves Connie re-captured and returned to incarceration, with little hope of escape.

Furthermore, the future vision of Mattapoisett itself is not ideal in any simplistic sense. That this place is not a 'situation of social perfection' is made clear from the fact that the society is engaged in warfare. One of the principle characters, Jackrabbit, is even killed in battle (p. 306). Moreover, there is evidence of dissatisfaction among the inhabitants, and also of strong ideological and political disagreement, in particular the argument concerning genetics between the factions labelled the 'Shakers' and 'Mixers' (p. 226). Connie is particularly disappointed that there are not enough resources to allow the inhabitants of Mattapoisett to drink coffee every day (p. 195).

*The Wanderground* also resists the genre limitation exercise of the critics. As in *WET*, there are no remedies for patriarchy here, but for different reasons. The world of Gearhart's novel is quite distant from our own, and one world, the eutopian world of the Wanderground, dominates. As in *WET*, the distinction between eutopia and dystopia is tested and challenged. The Wanderground itself is introduced to the reader in terms of a mapped contrast with 'Dangerland',<sup>17</sup> and also as the country it is contrasted with the city. However, throughout the novel, the reader is made aware of the danger surrounding the hill women, from the city and elsewhere. This awareness comes from mention of the danger within the Wanderground, but also from episodes where the women tell how they plan escapes from the oppression of the city, or where they are working on rotation in the city as spies from the Wanderground. Dystopian elements are also present in the form of knowledge of the past, demonstrated in the Remember

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<sup>17</sup> Sally Miller Gearhart, *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (New York: Alyson Publications, 1984), p. 1. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.



Rooms. In this way, as in *WET*, characters move between worlds. In addition, the danger from the city leads to serious dissension in the country - particularly over issues of separatism, for example (p. 171). So whilst the Wanderground, like Mattapoissett, has a fundamentally eutopian atmosphere, it too offers evidence of social unrest and disagreement such that it may not be described as a situation of social perfection. Both novels stress the fluidity of the bad with the good, resisting the dialectical oppositions of value constructed by the derisory definition.

It is in this sense that the genre may be rescued from the accusation of the derisory definition that utopian fiction 'lacks [...] dramatic tension'. Both of these novels may be said to construct a eutopian vision in dialogue with a seemingly contrasting - and therefore dystopian - vision. In other words, with a vision of otherness which is not delimited in terms of opposition, but rather offers a multiplicity of worlds on a relational continuum. In practice, this means that there may be elements of eutopia and dystopia in utopian novels, but that there may be no precise division between the two. As a result the accusation that these texts lack dramatic tension is misplaced, and the genre may instead be described in terms of the way in which it resists principles associated with binary oppositions, in particular the Principle of Contradiction, and the Principle of the Excluded Middle.

The derisory definition's conception of utopias as situations of social perfection which lack dramatic tension is mistaken, since it does not, and, I hope I have suggested, cannot, account for texts. I have argued in this section that the derisory definition leads to a view of utopian fiction as politically unrealistic, and aesthetically inadequate. In the next section, I will attempt to outline the dangers of attempting to salvage the genre as politically realistic.

## 2. HERMETIC PRAXIS

I contend here that the derisory definition implicitly harbours limitations even more damaging than the two examined in the previous section. The first has critics seeing utopian fiction as no more and no less than political manifestos. Feminist critics in particular have presented this interpretation of the genre as encapsulating its value for feminists. Secondly, I will argue that critics have tended to accept and reiterate the stasis injected into the genre of utopian fiction by the derisory definition, in terms of the idea that utopias are hermetically sealed in the past.

The derisory definition associates utopias with a mood of hope in the writer's political context. This is offered by the definition as a reason for the decline of utopian fiction; that when hope diminishes in the writer's lifetime, utopias also become less possible. The reference to hope invokes the Blochian notion of utopia as *Vor-Schein*, or 'anticipatory illumination'.<sup>18</sup> Yet for Bloch, the possibility of such anticipation is not facilitated by a convivial political atmosphere. Rather it is always present, and indeed may be said to allow for dissent from the dominant political climate, because as an ideological concept, it is characterized by change. Bloch reaches conversational consensus with Adorno on this point;

Bloch: I believe, Teddy, that we are certainly in agreement here: the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present [...]

Adorno: Yes, at any rate, utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of the project of reclaiming the genre, this conception is more hopeful, since it means that utopias can continue not only in spite of but also because of the grim contexts in which they are produced.

<sup>18</sup> See Ernst Bloch, 'Art and Utopia', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 78-155 (esp. pp. 141-155).

<sup>19</sup> 'Something's Missing: A Discussion Between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing', in Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, pp. 1-17 (p. 12).

In a similar spirit Tom Moylan heralds the return of 'a literary genre which seemed to have gone out of business'.<sup>20</sup> His aim is to revive utopian fiction by seeing it as specifically political. Moylan is so convinced by the political significance of utopian fiction that he is able to make the strong assertion that the genre's *raison d'être* is

to stimulate in its readers a desire for a better life and to motivate that desire toward action. (p. 35)

For Moylan, it is an understanding of utopian fiction as motivating as well as motivated by, an 'oppositional politics' (p. 12), that may put it back in 'business'. It is in the use of the term oppositional politics that Moylan's theory may be said to constitute a neo-Marxian contradiction of the idea that utopian fiction has declined as 'the twentieth century became grimmer'. Rather he believes that writers of utopian fiction use their novels to take issue with contemporary political situations, to engage in Adorno's 'determined negation'. As such, Moylan's is a revolutionary text in the field of utopian criticism. However, as a premise of his argument, Moylan still has to accept the implication of the derisory definition, which has it that utopian literature must bear a close, particular, and limiting relation to its contemporary political climate. This is because for Moylan, the utopian novel essentially provides a political critique.

It is this characterization of the genre of utopian fiction as fundamentally polemical which is often seen as peculiarly appropriate for feminist writers. Moylan's study is concerned to re-read all utopian fiction as political, but other feminist critics see this as a particular feature of women's writing in the area. Sarah Lefanu, for example, contends that female authors have actively politicized the entire field of science fiction writing. She presents the case that

there is some truth in what the critics say: women have brought politics into the genre.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 197. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Lefanu, 'Sex, Sub-Atomic Particles and Sociology', in *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction*, ed. by Lucie Armitt (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 178-185 (p. 180).

Agreeing with the critics here is a dangerous move; the accusation that feminists seek to make the non-political political is often used as an excuse for ignoring feminist arguments. Such accusations seek to undermine feminist perspectives by arguing that they are reading too much into things, or looking for problems where none exist. In this sense, the idea that the genre of utopian fiction was apolitical before feminists got their ideological hands on it works as a patriarchal myth. I presume here that it is an inaccurate myth, that the genre always was political, and that feminist politics stands out merely because it is a different politics.<sup>22</sup>

Lefanu is not the only feminist critic to make the connection between feminist science fiction and polemic. Carol Pearson also offers a discussion of texts within the genre which, she supposes, 'suggest political practice'.<sup>23</sup> Such an emphasis places a significant burden upon the author of utopian fiction to provide a model or blueprint for political action, and in particular implies a requirement for the author to include a description of the transformation from the reader's actual political world to the utopian state. It must tell readers what to do.

If feminist utopian fiction may be seen as merely a blueprint or at best, a consciousness-raising exercise, it follows that its value, and even its status, as literature may be questioned. That is, insofar as a novel is utopian, to that extent it cannot count as literature.<sup>24</sup> This point is evident in Krishan Kumar's conviction that

[o]n the whole, utopias are not very distinguished for their aesthetic qualities as works of literature, (*Utopia and Anti-Utopia*, p. ix)

and Toby Widdicombe's complaint that 'novelistic irrelevancies' confuse his analysis of utopian literature.<sup>25</sup> With only slightly more subtlety, Lucy Freibert views utopian novels entirely in terms of political questions and answers supplied by the texts. If the answers do not

<sup>22</sup> See for example Daphne Patai's effective exposure of the patriarchal politics of five classic texts of utopian literature in 'Utopia for Whom', *Aphra*, 5 (1974), 2-16.

<sup>23</sup> Carol S. Pearson, 'Of Time and Revolution: Theories of Social Change In Contemporary Feminist Science Fiction', in *Women In Search of Utopia*, ed. by Rohrich and Baruch, pp. 260-268 (p. 267).

<sup>24</sup> Readers will note a similarity between this argument and the argument which proposes a distinction between autobiography and literature. See Chapter Two, p. 66.

<sup>25</sup> Toby Widdicombe, 'Why Is There Barbed Wire Around Eutopia?', *Extrapolation*, 33:2 (1992), 145-153 (p. 150).

comply with Freibert's specified version of a feminist ideology, in terms of necessary and sufficient criteria for the identification of 'truly feminist works', then the texts may be dismissed as inadequate.<sup>26</sup> Considered as political tracts, rather than literature, brilliant works are deemed failures. For example, Freibert sums up her response to *WET* by saying that 'Piercy's answers are not totally satisfying' (p. 83).

Similarly, Lynn Williams argues that feminist utopias follow a strict pattern which makes them more polemic than aesthetic, and further, that the political solutions they offer are limited by the 'universal' nature of this pattern. In terms of political commentary on the real world, Williams concludes that '[f]eminist utopias offer us only anarchy as a solution'.<sup>27</sup>

Answers to political questions and solutions to patriarchal problems are not usually sought in art. Yet in some sense the connection between the art of feminist utopias and politics is perhaps a logical one. Feminists, after all, are dissatisfied with the world as it is (that is, patriarchal), and writers of utopian fiction in particular are often thought to be involved in the dramatizing of other supposedly better worlds. Similarly, it may be said that authors of feminist dystopian fiction sometimes engage in the imaging of extreme forms of patriarchy in order to express their dissatisfaction with the present patriarchy. But to concentrate solely on political interpretations of utopian texts is to make several critical errors, based on misconceptions about literature and feminism. I can highlight these errors with a syllogistic analysis of the critical assumptions involved. The argument which grounds this type of critique may be simplified in the following terms;

<sup>26</sup> Lucy M. Freibert, 'World Views In Utopian Novels by Women', in *Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations*, ed. by Marleen Barr and Nicholas D. Smith (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), pp. 67-84 (p. 67). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Lynn F. Williams, ' "Great Country for Men and Dogs, but Tough On Women and Mules": Sex and Status In Recent Science Fiction Utopias', in *Women Worldwalkers: New Dimensions of Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. by Jane B. Weedman (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech Press, 1985) pp. 223-235 (p. 233).

Feminists share a certain vision of the world

Utopian novelists dramatically represent their preferred vision of the world

THEREFORE

Feminist utopian fictions are to be examined as political manifestos

I suggest that this argument is neither valid nor sound; that the conclusion does not follow from the premises, and that the premises are in any case false. A belief that the conclusion does follow from the premises involves a view of art whereby the artefact represents a manifestation of the artists' intentions. It is important to note that this mistake is not always conscious. Yet, as my logical breakdown of their argument shows, critics such as Freibert and Williams are guilty in aesthetic terms of committing the 'personal heresy'; of attributing the aims of the author to the text, and of the text to the author.<sup>28</sup> In other words, they erect a simple and direct connection between author and text, which fails to take account of the complexities of other factors which contribute to meaning.

The first premise of the syllogism - that feminists share a vision of the world - is simply false. There is no such thing as "feminism"; only "feminisms". The debates among feminists are wide and varied, as Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong show in their short summary of the diversity involved;

Feminists disagree about which aspects of women's lives [...] best explain women's oppression, repression, and suppression under patriarchy. They also disagree about which legal remedies, job opportunities, sexual experiments, reproductive technologies, and linguistic revisions are most likely to liberate women. Finally, they disagree about which forms of oppression other than gender oppression feminists must address: racism, classism, homophobia, ageism, or any and all forms of systematic discrimination.<sup>29</sup>

Criticism such as that provided by Lucy Freibert is clearly guilty of ignoring such diversity.

This is what makes the type of analysis of utopian fiction I have been examining so limiting; it

<sup>28</sup> See E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, *The Personal Heresy: A Controversy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

<sup>29</sup> Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong, 'Introduction' to their edited collection *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings In Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. xi-xii (p. xi).

attempts an impossible task which it assumes the novelist to be similarly attempting - an exposition of a definitive feminist vision.

The second premise - on the role of utopian novelists - springs from the view that utopian fictions portray 'situations of social perfection', but also adds the figure of the author as political theorist. A simplistic understanding of the genre as so many descriptions of a good place, combined with the purely political interpretations of which I have offered evidence, has led critics to see the worlds of the utopian texts as recommendations for readers' real lives. Conversely, so-called dystopian novels are seen as warnings against the development of misogynist cultures. This idea introduces the idea of means and ends to the debate on utopias. Here, utopian fiction is pictured as a means to a politically improved situation, or as 'a literary form put to the service of social analysis and social criticism'.<sup>30</sup> Arguments proposing the political service of utopian ideas have been a common feature of Marxian aesthetics, which tends to garner support for the arts in terms of their potential political function.<sup>31</sup> This mirrors the argument proposed to explain how literature can be philosophical, by philosophers exploiting literature. I argued that the gendered terms makes this kind of argument misogynistic, and that the exploitation of literature for non-literary ends is ethically problematic.<sup>32</sup> I think that those arguments apply here, and that to lose sight of the literary value of utopian fiction, as so many critics seem to, is to simplify the way in which they work; in particular, it is to neglect their textuality.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Concepts In the Social Sciences: Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. vii.

<sup>31</sup> This can happen in two ways, as I understand it. The first is to the denigration of utopias, and the second to their veneration. Frederick Engels, in his *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. by Edward Aveling (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892), takes Marx's line that utopias are unrealistic and therefore to be avoided in political theory, but that they can work as a precursor to real, or scientific, socialism. This contrasts with Bloch's notion that utopian ideas presented through or by artistic endeavours can lead to social democracy and political harmony.

<sup>32</sup> See Chapter One, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> For an interesting attempt to call this neglect into account see Darko Suvin, 'Defining the Literary Genre of Utopia: Some Historical Semantics, Some Genology, a Proposal, and a Plea', in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 37-62.



Yet a simplistic focus on the artistic nature of utopias also creates difficulties. Karl Popper argues that utopian writings are **politically** unethical precisely because they propose political means for ends which are fundamentally aesthetic. Objecting to Plato's *Republic* as a representative utopia he says

I do not believe that human lives may be made the means for satisfying an artist's desire for self-expression.<sup>34</sup>

If there was a problem in erecting political ends for the means of utopian fiction, there is a parallel problem of proposing utopian ends by political means. The problems with the political connections claimed for utopian fiction is that they invariably offer a specific function to literature. As a result, although it is clearly a mistake to posit utopian fiction as a means to an end, it is also problematic to see utopias as an end. Again, to place utopian fiction on either end of a cause-effect relation, is to provide an overly simplistic reduction of the genre. This is not to say that utopian novels cannot produce effects. Popper himself offers proof of the evocative power of the genre when he recalls having read a utopian fiction classic as an adolescent;

The first book on socialism I read [...] was Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. I must have read it when I was about twelve, and it made a great impression on me.<sup>35</sup>

But the effect which such novels bring about may be usefully described in terms of 'indeterminacy'.<sup>36</sup> The identification of a political theme, and even the suggestion that a novel may be identified as a representative book 'on socialism' may be distinguished from the positioning of the novel either as identifiable cause, or as determinable effect in the formation of the young Popper's political sensibility. The temptation to invoke the fable of necessary connection must be resisted Humeably.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Popper, *Open Society*, v1, p. 165.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Popper, 'Autobiography of Karl Popper', in *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, 2 vols., ed. by Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), pp. 1-181 (pp. 8-9).

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Belsey applies this label to the genre of utopian fiction in *Desire: Love Stories In Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 201.

<sup>37</sup> See David Hume, 'Of the Idea of Necessary Connection', in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 205-223.

I have argued that the derisory definition's identification of a close, necessary and limiting relationship between utopian novels and politics is to be avoided, particularly by feminists. I now want to make a connection between this idea and the notion of generic stasis proposed by the derisory definition. The way in which the definition speaks of examples of the genre having been numerous at a point in the past, and of the genre as having been in 'decline' since the days of '[e]arly science fiction', suggests an historical approach to the genre, one which has been fairly prevalent.<sup>38</sup> Yet the identification of utopian fiction as a genre which may be confined in the past is not historicist in any simple way. I can make this clear by comparing it to an anti-historicist approach to utopias, such as that described dismissively by Engels. Engels says that those who have faith in utopian socialism claim that it expresses

absolute truth, reason, and justice, and has only to be discovered to conquer all the world by virtue of its power. And as absolute knowledge is independent of time, space, and of the historical development of man [sic], it is a mere accident when and where it is discovered.<sup>39</sup>

The Hegelian notion of an absolute knowledge invokes a myth of transcendence, which is at the same time a myth of confinement, because it seeks to separate the theory from the theorist, in precisely the same way that purveyors of historicist analyses seek to place the genre and its texts at a distance from their own position.

In this sense, both historicist and anti-historicist approaches stress the containment of the genre. They suggest that utopias form an holistic genre, whose substance is entirely self-sustaining, and whose beginning and end can be pictured together, either in the past, or in the world of Spirit, but always sealed off from the one who does the picturing. The utopian novel, on this view, is an entire world in a glass ball, to be taken up and shaken, then disposed of at will. This follows from the identification of utopia either as means to a specified end, or as the

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<sup>38</sup> So many analyses of the genre tend to be chronological. For perhaps a definitive example see Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought In the Western World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979). The authors assert that 'the whole of this work is intended to endow the idea of utopia with historical meaning' (p. 5). Interestingly enough, Frank Manuel undertakes a similar project with regard to the history of philosophy, where even greater emphasis is placed on the author's role as objective reader of historical events, with the remark 'I come before you to bear witness to the flood, not to swell it', in his *Shapes of Philosophical History* (Hampshire: Gregg Revivals, 1993), p. 137.

<sup>39</sup> Engels, p. 26.

end itself, because a world in which causes and effects are in principle identifiable encapsulates precisely a fully determined universe, a world where free will is an illusion because all “choices” which people may make are pre-determined by some external force. Stability, and probability, are words which describe positively this state which is at the same time constraining and restrictive. This is truly the bland situation of social perfection decried by the derisory definition, and it comes about not in spite of but because of any claims of the genre (on behalf of its theorists) to be politically realistic.

The attempt to rescue the genre of utopian fiction by emphasizing its polemic content is misguided and at odds with the notion of an incitement to read. It incoherently posits utopia as politically realistic and at the same time, determined; sealed off from the world. As a result, this conception of the genre is closer to a tradition of stories told by philosophers in order to illustrate their arguments. In the next section I will develop the comparison between these stories, and a particular understanding of utopian fiction.

### 3. UTOPIAS AS POSSIBLE WORLDS

In this section I want to examine a particular version of utopian literary theory which seems to offer an understanding of such literature as philosophical. Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that contemporary women writers use the genre of utopian fiction to focus on themes associated with mind and consciousness. Moreover, she examines utopian fictions specifically within the context of kinds of writing which radically resist stasis. For DuPlessis, the possibilities offered

by the genre - for both reader and writer - are peculiarly feminist, in the sense that they offer a 'critique' which 'can involve the visualization of the world as it could be'.<sup>40</sup>

On this view, writing within the genre is premised upon an appeal for the reader to "imagine a world where...", helping he/r to suspend disbelief and picture a whole world, completely unlike he/r own, in order that s/he might learn something about the world which is he/r own. Some philosophers have sought to explain the operations of all types of fiction in terms of such possible worlds.<sup>41</sup> For example, Noël Carroll suggests that statements in fiction can be understood as working in terms of our being asked, as readers, to 'entertain [...] proposition[s]'.<sup>42</sup> Specifically, in the case of *The Wanderground*, readers are asked to entertain the proposition that plant-life can communicate and cooperate with people. To make this clearer, Carroll says that ideas in fiction are ones which

I suppose [...] as I might suppose the proposition that the moon is made of green cheese. (p. 99)

Such a notion offers an explanation of how literature may be philosophical by saying that, for example novels may propose putative solutions to philosophical problems. Indeed, the notion of fictional texts as possible worlds seems to refer to a kind of fiction which is already widely used within traditional philosophical texts. I am referring to those stories or thought experiments employed by philosophers to illustrate their arguments, which I rejected in Chapter One as a subtle relegation of literature. For even if the current status of these examples colludes with the Platonic value system, this may be something which can be redressed through analysis of a whole genre.

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<sup>40</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ' "Kin with each other": Speculative Consciousness and Collective Protagonists', in *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 178-197 (p. 179). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>41</sup> This involves the application of modal logic to the question of fiction. See for example David Lewis, 'Truth In Fiction', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15:1 (1978), 37-46.

<sup>42</sup> Noël Carroll, 'Critical Study: *Mimesis as Make-Believe*', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 45:178 (1995), 93-99 (p. 99). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

Daniel Dennett identifies a particular category of thought experiments as 'intuition pumps', and makes a strong case for their 'centrality and influence [...] in the development of philosophy'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, their significance can be explained in relation to the very purpose of philosophy, the study of which is designed with a view to 'enlarging our vision of the possible' (p. 18). Dennett's notion of intuition pumps has many parallels with DuPlessis' conception of feminist utopian fiction, and as such seems to offer hope by association that utopian literature may be seen as philosophical. Yet I feel that this notion of possible worlds does not work to explain literature's capacity for philosophical analysis, specifically because Dennett is in agreement with DuPlessis at precisely those moments when she invokes the flaws of the derisory definition.

DuPlessis characterizes the genre of utopian fiction as fundamentally teleological, consisting of texts which may be understood as 'teaching stories' (p. 179). Like DuPlessis, Dennett emphasizes the didactic nature of thought experiments, asserting that philosopher's tales function as 'powerful pedagogical devices' (p. 18). Both writers, then, invoke the functionality of literature which I criticized above as a problematic induced by the derisory definition. But there are hidden additional difficulties with their conceptions.

I can illustrate my concerns by looking at a specific example offered by Dennett. John Searle's Chinese room argument is designed to show that computers cannot be said to think or understand for themselves, and so that mind is not reducible to physical components, as certain materialists (such as Dennett, for example) would have us believe. Searle asks his readers to suppose themselves in the position of the computer as he sees it;

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 17. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating these Chinese symbols [...] the rule might say: 'Take a squiggle-squiggle sign out of basket number one and put it next to a squoggle-squoggle sign from basket number two.'<sup>44</sup>

The model demonstrates that a person is in principle able to deal with and process information written in Chinese even though that person is not able to understand the language. Therefore, the fact that computers can deal with difficult and complex notions does not mean that they may be said to understand such concepts themselves, only that they are able to do things with them, as instructed by programmers.

The illustration works by an interesting reductive analysis of the elements involved to simple oppositions. The notion of computer programming, which might seem remarkably complex and sophisticated, is reduced to lo-tech symbols of baskets and overtly simplified rule-books, with an added touch of humility which places author and reader in the position of the mechanical sorter. In contrast, the conscious development of ideas which come from people, the collective intellect which is so brilliant as to make human minds indubitably unique, but which people often take for granted, is figured in an alien language of 'squiggle-squiggle' and 'squoggle-squoggle'. Whilst anyone - or, crucially for Searle's argument, any **thing** - can be reasonably expected to apply 'the rule-book in English' appropriately, it is of course ridiculous for us to expect them to understand something so incomprehensible as the Chinese language.

I have argued that the derisory definition instigates a close, necessary and limiting relationship between utopias and politics, and that this may be used by critics either to criticize utopian novels as politically unrealistic, as does Lynn Williams, or to interpret the texts of the genre in terms of their contributions to political science, as does Lucy Freibert. A political interpretation of Searle's story would be relatively simple to initiate; the story is an

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<sup>44</sup> John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science: The 1984 Reith Lectures* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 32. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

imperialistic one. Searle's story is a story of prejudice. The most obvious sense in which this is the case is in its presentation of the Chinese language as a kind of gobbledegook which no reasonable person could be expected to understand. Moreover, the reader is made complicit in this operation, since

the whole point of the parable of the Chinese room is to remind us of a fact we knew all along. (p. 33)

This represents a second sense in which the story is founded on prejudice; its force lies in our understanding its point before we hear it. To this extent the story of the Chinese room reads itself for us; its first move is to lock us in a room in an attempt to force our agreement.

Such stories, as conceived by DuPlessis and Dennett, are paradigm cases of 'telic art', or art which is best understood as a means to an end.<sup>45</sup> In addition, because that end is pre-determined by the author, whose will is personified by the story, the story is also self-containing. It is a means to its own end. Again, intuition pumps like Searle's are fundamentally circular because they assume and are premised on their own truth; they pre-judge themselves. A connection with this idea is suggested by DuPlessis in her analysis of character in utopian fiction. Character marks the place where DuPlessis makes the specific connection between the genre of utopian fiction and the philosophical. She says;

[c]haracters in these teaching stories are like Socratic questions; the ideas, not the characters, are well rounded. (p. 179)

To illustrate this point, she later refers to a specific character in a utopian novel written by Joanna Russ as being '[l]ike a Socratic question to which Russ knows the answer' (p. 184). Most obviously, this notion indicates that a philosophical connection is conceived in terms which offer a simplistic and direct account of the relationship between the author and the text. More specifically, DuPlessis implies an authorial determination which views effects of texts as being fundamentally decideable. DuPlessis underestimates the way in which such a restrictive

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<sup>45</sup> I take this term and its sense from John Passmore, *Serious Art: A Study of the Concept In All the Major Arts* (London: Duckworth, 1991), p. 6.



view of the genre itself works to generate stasis. Because Russ is to be understood as making a point, the role of the reader comes to be simply to find out what that point was; to be open to didactic manipulation. Rather than facilitating a possibility which is beyond the text, such an aesthetic identifies the text as essentially unified and holistic, and inevitably static.

This is also made clear in the second notion cited by Dennett as philosophy's *raison d'être*. In addition to expanding the realm of the possible, intuition pumps are said to illustrate a further philosophical task of 'breaking bad habits of thought' (p. 18). If the case of Searle's Chinese Room is representative, this term might be understood to mean that free thinking is to be avoided in philosophy, because such tales only seek to persuade the reader of the author's point of view; thinking is thus an unnecessary 'bad habit'. Intuition pumps become a way of breaking that bad habit of thinking. Indeed, Dennett's remarks on the pervasive influence of intuition pumps are followed by a critical dismantling of the intuition pumps which he argues 'feed' anxieties relating to the subject of free-will. This critical dismantling, readers are told, will necessarily preface the analysis of the 'residual philosophical problems of genuine interest' (p. 18). In other words, intuition pumps, or holistic philosophical tales, mislead and distract by admitting only of a singular perspective, and so can be stripped away to leave the substantive arguments for which they served as decoration.

In this way both Dennett and DuPlessis end up discussing, albeit in very different ways, a type of story which can count as neither literature nor philosophy, and so cannot explain how literature can be philosophical, in spite of the apparently promising nature of their arguments with regard to my discussion of utopian fiction. And this is why philosophers' illustrations, or indeed all analogues which are apologues, count as neither literature nor philosophy. Such stories are persuasive tools of torture, pushing readers to a single conclusion, rather than developing and stimulating ideas in different directions.

The notion of possible worlds, then, is inadequate as an explanation of how it is that literature can be philosophical. This is because, to return to Carroll's example, the philosophical issues which arise from my reading of the novels are said to be like the supposition that the moon is made of green cheese, involving an absolute suspension of disbelief. Readers are to take seriously notions which they would not ordinarily consider at all, but only temporarily, and for a particular pre-determined purpose. Crucially, Carroll specifies that entertaining fiction notions involves 'supposing them without commitment'.<sup>46</sup> This description allows the notion of 'possibility' to slide into an emphasis on '*mere possibility*'.<sup>47</sup> It permits utopias in fiction to make philosophical points, but only as addenda to real philosophical arguments. In other words, it is not possible to escape from the Platonic value system through the gate of possible worlds, putative solutions, or thought experiments, even when these ideas are conceived in the terms of a whole genre, because they follow the derisory definition in picturing utopian novels as glass balls containing glitter and snow covered villages. Feminist versions of these future worlds may indeed show how feminism could really work, but only in terms of a political blueprint for a feminist theme park.

Moreover, texts understood as descriptions of a perfect world tell their readers what to think - firstly that whatever happens there must be judged as good, and secondly that whatever happens there could never really happen. In other words the restrictions of this definition transform themselves into restrictions on conceptualizing. Philosophical tales take place in a vacuum, where responses which draw attention to, for example, the racism of Searle's illustration, are labelled irrelevant; the person objecting seen to be "missing the point".

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<sup>46</sup> Carroll, p. 98.

<sup>47</sup> See Hilary Putnam, 'Literature, Science, and Reflection', *New Literary History*, 7:3 (1976), 483-491 (p. 488, author's italics). My use of Putnam's contrast here is similar to the contrast drawn by Karl Mannheim between 'history' and 'mere history', where the latter term draws out the inadequacy of certain analyses of the concept, in *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. by Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York: Harvest Books, 1936), p. 92.

Searle's room assumes itself to be free of socio-political constructs, but in fact cannot entirely abstract itself from prejudice; it is locked in the room with us.

Marge Piercy's *WET* offers an interesting account of the kinds of discussion which might take place in such a context. Connie describes how the dystopian world of the institution in which she is incarcerated encourages, or at the very least facilitates, abstract thinking, since it was only there that the inmates found the

leisure to argue about God and Sex and the State and the Good [...] sitting around talking philosophy. (p. 86)

The grim constrained reality of life as an inmate ironically nurtures a free thinking about society, its beliefs and structures, a 'leisure' which comes at the price of dislocation from each of the elements of life which they represent. Religious, sexual, political and moral freedoms are not part of life for those in the hospital, and so the subjects of their debate can be discussed without seriousness. There is a futility in the tone of the statement which collects together all those Big Ideas, concepts which have occupied Great Minds for centuries, and then sums up their invocation as an impotent 'sitting around talking philosophy'. The anti-climax works as a critique of that philosophy which belongs to the ivory tower, or to Searle's room, where ideas are discussed in isolation, without taking account of the prejudice which must perforce infuse them.

The traditions of the derisory definition, and the non-traditional adherents to it, keep the genre distinct from feminist, philosophical and utopian thinking. I now seek to bring them together.

## ***B. Making Utopian Fiction Feminist Philosophical***

In this section I will propose three notions which connect utopia with feminist philosophy as an incitement to read. The first is that of defamiliarization, the second is uncertainty, and the third possibility. I will conceive of the three notions in a developmental fashion.

### **1. DEFAMILIARIZATION**

Defamiliarization is a term coined by the Russian formalist Victor Shlovsky, who argues that

*Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*<sup>48</sup>

Shlovsky seeks to focus attention upon not what art represents but rather how it presents; its technique or 'artfulness'. At the same time, there is no reason why focusing on the technique should necessarily preclude analysis of that which is presented. Rather defamiliarization can be understood as describing the process whereby technique calls attention to the object, forcing me to consider that which I take for granted in everyday life as if it were my first encounter with it. It is an aesthetic attitude adopted in order to stimulate consideration of life as it is not normally considered.

Daphne Patai has shown that defamiliarization of this kind is a fundamental element of utopian fiction. She says that such novels' employment of defamiliarization effectively

breaks through our automatic familiarity and acceptance of our own society by estranging us from it and making us view it critically.<sup>49</sup>

Works within the genre of utopian fiction create new worlds and, thereby, new relationships between the readers and their world. Defamiliarization describes how this works most usefully.

<sup>48</sup> Victor Shlovsky, 'Art as Technique' trans. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 5-24 (p. 12, author's italics).

<sup>49</sup> Daphne Patai, 'Beyond Defensiveness: Feminist Research Strategies', in *Women and Utopia*, ed. by Barr and Smith, pp. 148-169 (p. 152).

It relates aspects of the world in which readers live as if from a perspective outside that world, in order to urge the reader to read differently. In this sense defamiliarization brings the relativity implied by the evaluative aspects of utopia - namely eutopia and dystopia - to the centre of my understanding of the genre, by introducing a notion of wilful alienation.

Traditionally, philosophers have promoted a strategy of alienation as a philosophical method. Philosophical study is often usefully introduced to new students as the “asking of naive questions” which concern the search for meanings of notions with which they are already familiar, for example knowledge, justice, truth, art, and so on.<sup>50</sup> These concepts are stripped of their everyday contexts, whilst methods such as logical analysis are used to allow the philosopher to assess them anew. Philosophers thus might focus on the idea of detachment to characterize philosophical understanding. In Chapter Two I suggested some ways in which detachment from philosophical issues might be problematic. However, the notion of defamiliarization may be employed to salvage the ways in which philosophy can usefully make strange the world and my experience of it, whilst retaining an awareness of where I am coming from. For example, a version of defamiliarization may be read in this description of the philosophical method by Bertrand Russell;

Philosophy [...] is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge of what they may be; [...] it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.<sup>51</sup>

The notion of defamiliarization can be used to distinguish this analysis of Russell's from his urge to omniscience which I queried in Chapter Two. Here, there is no appeal to discard situation or specificity. Nor is the subject of philosophy abstracted as ‘man’ (p. 93). Rather, the call to alienation is a call to ‘our’ subjectivities to make an imaginative, intellectual extension from subjectivity. The effect of this extension is described coherently in terms of

<sup>50</sup> This approach is captured effectively in the title of A. F. Chalmers' popular introduction to the philosophy of science; *What Is This Thing Called Science? An Assessment of the Nature and Status of Science and Its Methods* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1978).

<sup>51</sup> Russell, p. 91. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

individual writers and readers, their relationships, and the possibilities for movement between them.

That defamiliarization focuses on relationships and change makes it peculiarly appropriate for feminist writers. Feminists have often sought to shift the focus of academic concern from isolated objects and subjects to the spaces between them.<sup>52</sup> The advantage of defamiliarization is that it implicates the notion of movements in these between places. As a conception of utopian fiction it resists stasis, and requires kinesis, or, more specifically, an ongoing willingness to move.<sup>53</sup> This movement may be understood as a crucial element of feminism, in two specific senses. First, having thought that certain ways of regarding ourselves and others are not only acceptable but also natural, defamiliarization of patriarchal attitudes can lead to new perspectives on our existence and behaviour.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, this defamiliarization may initiate a process whereby feminists continue to resist that which presents itself as natural.

I would like to illustrate this second stage of association with reference to a remark by Sheila Rowbotham. Rowbotham's persistent emphasis upon the role of praxis for feminism may be captured in her reference to 'the oppressive distancing of theory'. However, Rowbotham also manages to theorize another version of theory which is fundamentally motivating;

'Abstraction' should help us to move when we wish and settle in the best camping places.<sup>55</sup>

Movement is, I suggest, the most significant element of this intuition pump, which resists the permanence of bricks and mortar and instead emphasizes the importance of shifting ground.

Moreover, Rowbotham's gesture, in de-camping from her rejection of theory, rather than

<sup>52</sup> A significant example is that of object relations theory. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>53</sup> H. G. Wells draws a distinction between traditional utopias, which may be labelled static, and utopias for the new age, which must perforce be kinetic. See *A Modern Utopia* (London: Nelson and Sons, [n.d.]), p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> See Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness', in *Femininity and Domination: Studies In the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 11-21.

<sup>55</sup> Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979), p. 55.

settling within the safe binary opposition of praxis defined against theory, offers a demonstration of the importance of such feminist movement. By incorporating this kind of resistance, then, the notion of defamiliarization offers to draw feminists to the utopian and the philosophical.

Philosophy, feminism and utopian fiction share common ground in the defamiliarization process. Another way of saying this is that the genre of utopian fiction's employment of the techniques of defamiliarization make it a particularly appropriate camping place for the feminist and the philosophical. The incitement to read which the disciplines thus share may be seen as a process whereby our automatic understanding of such ideas is replaced by an approach which

exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*.<sup>56</sup>

In this way defamiliarization offers hope for the beginning of a new way of understanding reading as feeling, and for these reasons forms the first premise for my understanding of utopian fiction as feminist and philosophical.

## 2. UNCERTAINTY

The second stage of this process initiated by defamiliarization invokes uncertainty. Utopian fiction, understood as feminist and philosophical, has a destabilizing effect, in the sense that it makes the reader think in a way which insists that I regard myself as an other. In this way, not only is the reader barred from assuming the familiar context of he/r life, but s/he is also to be drawn out of he/r own subjectivity. This challenges, for example, Searle's rhetorical justification of prejudice on the basis of arguing from the assumption that 'you (like me) do not

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<sup>56</sup> Shlovsky, p. 12.



understand a word of Chinese', by removing any certainty that others are like him in this respect. Traditionally, utopian fiction achieves this uncertainty by having a stranger from another world express wonder at features of society which readers may take for granted, or by presenting a world where certain features which readers may regard as indispensable are dispensed with. In the case of feminist utopian fiction, this may mean that notions are exposed as sexist, and supportive of patriarchal power relationships. Uncertainty arises as a result of the position of the reader, who is invited to move between locations of strangeness and familiarity, becoming less sure of, for example, what is natural, what is inevitable, and what is good.

Moments of uncertainty in *WET* are presented during the scenes concerning human reproductive methods in Mattapoisett. The eutopian society employs a process of mechanical reproduction, and collaborative parenting, both designed to free women from the labours of the birthing process. A number of critics have noted similarities between these sections of *WET* and feminist visions of society which see biological functions as working against women, and make the case that liberation would be liberation from them.<sup>57</sup> Far fewer critics note that mechanical reproduction is not simply a preferred alternative in the text. In fact, the novel's protagonist is greatly disturbed by the reproductive technology of the future world. Connie's upset and anger focuses specifically on the mechanization of the reproductive process, as she imagines 'a canned child', and contrasts this with her privileged phenomenological knowledge;

How could anyone know what being a mother means who has never carried a child nine months heavy under her heart, [...] who has never suckled a child. What do they know of motherhood?

Connie goes on to make a direct connection between the 'bland bottle-born monsters' of Mattapoisett, and the oppressive forces of her world which took away 'my flesh and blood' (p. 106). Connie's perspective, then, opposes that of the eutopia. But her perspective is not a

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<sup>57</sup> An example of such a political text is Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case For Feminist Revolution* (London: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 211. The connection between Firestone's text and *WET* is pointed out by Moylan, pp. 134-135; and Sarah Lefanu, *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1988), p. 59.

straw figure, invoked for purposes of ridicule. Similar arguments, for example, are presented by Iris Marion Young in an article presenting a phenomenological analysis of pregnancy. Young argues that in a patriarchal society '[p]regnancy does not belong to the woman herself'.<sup>58</sup> Specifically

the pregnant subject's encounter with obstetrical medicine [...] often alienates her from her pregnant and birthing experience [...] because medical instruments objectify internal processes in such a way that they devalue a woman's experience of those processes, and because the social relations and instrumentation of the medical setting reduce her control over her experience. (p. 168)

Such a feeling is expressed in Connie's negative response to the futuristic methods of reproduction in Mattapoisett. As part of her tour of Luciente's village, she is shown around the 'brooder' (p. 101), where she sees not 'embryos', as they are described by Bee, but 'seven human babies joggling slowly upside down' (p. 102). Aghast at the notion of mechanical birth, Connie immediately experiences a parallel physical reaction, and 'gaped, her stomach also turning slowly upside down' (p. 102).

The fact that Connie has experienced biological motherhood is not ignored by the inhabitants of the future world, but the questions they ask seem superficial and mystify the reader as much as they do Connie;

"Did you bear alive?" [...] "Was there a lot of blood?" [...] "Was it exciting? Did it feel sexual?" (p. 103)

Connie's experience of pregnancy makes her an oddity to the people of Mattapoisett, even though it is perfectly ordinary for the reader. Yet is it? The alienation which Connie experiences seems to parallel that of Young's pregnant subject in the patriarchal world. The uncertainty here is to be found in the extent to which readers simultaneously share and reject Connie's position. Alienated by her contemporaries, her family, and the authorities, Connie has turned to this new world for solace and understanding, only to find that its inhabitants also

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<sup>58</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Pregnant Embodiment: Subjectivity and Alienation', in *Throwing Like a Girl, and Other Essays In Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 160-174 (p. 160). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

exclude her. Moreover, she finds that her attitude to the reproductive methods of Mattapoissett may mean that she excludes herself. As a result the reader, like Connie, doesn't know where s/he stands, either in relation to others, or even in relation to he/rself.

The success of the technique whereby readers invest in Connie's uncertainty may be apparent in the number of critics who assume without question that Connie's world and that of the readers are one and the same. My conception of the genre urges a resistance to the certainty that this is a representation of contemporary life, because although I can see similarities, there are also differences. It might be more accurate to say that in *WET*, readers react with Connie to the new concepts with which they are confronted. As a result, her alienation is our alienation, and, crucially, ours is also hers. The text cleverly places us in the position of the oppressed rather than merely presenting us with images of oppression. But at the same time, it refuses to offer a simple position with which we may identify, because the alternatives are so compelling. Instead, readers are forced to read in the in-between. As a feminist philosophical strategy, then, this creation of uncertainty through defamiliarization is a technique which effectively engages the reader in active reference.<sup>59</sup>

### 3. POSSIBILITY

Thirdly, and relatedly, I suggest that potential for feminist interpretations of utopian literature lies in the notion of the genre representing real possibilities for my consideration, rather than make-believe possibilities for my entertainment. At first these possibilities may not make sense, and may even prove disorienting and disconcerting, but gradually, readers may learn to

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<sup>59</sup> My reading of *WET* here contrasts starkly with that of Frances Bartkowski, in *Feminist Utopias* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). Bartkowski insists that Piercy's novel is 'static', and 'places the reader in the position of passively receiving' (p. 50).

rethink conceptual schemes, the way in which we regard people and objects around us, and the way in which different aspects of our world fit together.

In *The Wanderground*, readers are asked to consider the possibility that the natural world participates in harmony with the human world; that plants communicate with people, and offer mutually beneficial exchanges. A poignant example occurs when, eager but exhausted on her journey to the Remember Rooms, Clana asks for help from a fern;

“will you pretend that you live on tiredness? And I will live on being excited?” The fern immediately agreed and [...] Clana [...] inhaled the rich energy that was the fern’s exhalation and gave back to the plant [...] tiredness; that tiredness was the stuff of the fern’s life. She could actually see the plant soaking up her fatigue, quenching its thirst. “It works!” she thought. (p. 134)

Such a possibility can be seen in terms of a defamiliarization of the natural world, followed by an assumption of uncertainty as to the reader’s attitude to this. This background means that the consideration of possibilities is not confined within a binary opposition whose role is to decide “is this possible or is it not?” and then “given that it is not possible, what would a world in which it was possible look like?”, but rather focuses upon questions like “in what ways does Clana’s attitude differ from my own?”, and “what might it mean for me now to make this supposition?”. In this way the possibilities of utopian fiction may signal the achievement of movement beyond conceptual schema with which I am comfortable and familiar, towards a radical contingency which values openness and creativity, and the freedom of space in the middle excluded by the logic of binary oppositions.

Utopian fiction, then, may be premised on the claim that the world which appears to us is not the way it is necessarily; it might have been otherwise. However, where traditional philosophical skepticism may focus upon the negative here, utopian fiction may emphasize the positive. It can reflect an important element of optimism in the genre of utopian fiction, by

addressing that which could be. So, the notion of contingency offers a way of talking about otherness in a new and positive way.

The possibility of otherness does not constitute a denial of my subject position. Rather it incorporates a recognition of this position along with the demand that I be able to move imaginatively beyond that position to a position of otherness. In this sense, contingency is a way of looking at the world openly. It asks readers to notice that this could be that, then could be now, there could be here, and you could be me. Moreover, because my own position is radically implicated as, at the very least, a reference point, in all of these possibilities, they can never be mere idle speculation, but rather constitute a serious consideration of multiple possibilities.

Contemplation of contingencies then, is one crucial way in which defamiliarization operates through uncertainty to demand the possibilities of feminist philosophical movement. I will continue my meditative project by looking at the possibility of knowledge which is not introspective, involving knowledge of my own subject position, but rather involves knowing others. This may materialize into specific philosophical questions such as “do other minds exist?”; “how is communication possible?”; “how can one mind interact with others?”, all questions which the genre of utopian fiction as I have described it seems peculiarly placed to address.

### ***C. Reading Philosophical Utopian Fiction***

The problem of other minds arises from Cartesian skepticism, and begins by asking “how can I

know of the existence of other minds?”. Utopian fiction offers a way of looking at this question liberated from its skeptical origins, by focusing on the possibilities of growing aware of other minds and their contents. So, where analytic philosophy tends to concentrate on the examination of the significance and consequences of a putative impossibility of the existence of other minds, fiction which falls within the remit of this genre can examine the significance and consequences of a putative possibility of the existence of other minds. In addition, utopian fiction is well placed to offer a much greater range of analysis in connection with this philosophical question, because it asks it afresh. As a result, I hope to develop the concerns of this section to the consideration of the communicative potential of investigating other minds. But the novels which I have chosen to examine might be shown to begin with an analysis of that strange question, “how can one mind know of the existence of other minds?”.

## 1. THE ABSURD QUESTION

How is it possible to be aware of the existence of other minds? From outside the traditional field of philosophy, this sounds like an absurd question.<sup>60</sup> In this section I will take the two novels upon which I have chosen to focus to argue differently in response to this absurdity. In the case of *The Wanderground*, an attempt is made to represent the imaginative picture of the relationships between minds, and so overcome the superficial absurdity of the question. On the other hand, I will suggest that *WET* argues that the absurdity is not a superficiality of the question, but rather a crucial element of it, and further, that this absurdity itself offers a way of imaging the problem. I interpret this novel to suggest that any answer to the question about the existence of other minds is equally absurd, and both question and answer can only be understood in terms of madness. Note that this is quite different from an argument that the

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<sup>60</sup> My starting point here may be contrasted with Cavell's argument in *Disowning Knowledge* that dramatic tragedy may be said to revalue the discredited claims of radical skepticism.

question cannot be “made sense of” at all, but nonetheless, it is a perspective which refuses to be certain of the significance of questions about the existence of other minds.

In the first of Sally Miller Gearhart’s stories in *The Wanderground*, the reader is introduced to a layering of experience which offers the opportunity of experiencing the point of view of others. I want to refer closely to the opening of this story in order to make my point clear. The story begins like this;

#### Opening

Jacqua stood above the Eastern Ensconement gazing across the high meadow. Far below, anger was being spoken. She knew that anger came from two sisters who had overvisited with each other, but she could grasp no words - only intentions. Suddenly from a completely different direction she heard in her head the clang of armor. (p. 1)

The title of this first story warns the reader that something new and different is going to happen here. In addition, opening is the word which will be used in the novel to describe the process of allowing other people into one’s consciousness. The different layers of consciousness are set up spatially. Jacqua stands with the reader high up, looking across the landscape, whilst the core events of the story of ‘Opening’, and the scene to which the reader’s attentions eventually will be drawn, happen on the ground beneath her. There is a traditional premise of distinction, between someone monitoring, and other separate groups being monitored. This is the premise of the question as to whether or not other minds exist. It opposes object to subject in a picture of communication through confrontation. However, Jacqua’s knowledge does not conform to such a pattern. To begin with, her knowledge of anger is not a result of inferring mental causes from linguistic effects; the latter are not available to her. What she does ‘grasp’, are the projections of the women; their intentions. Because her awareness is cited at the level of projection, the general knowledge of existence of other minds contributes to the specific knowledge of this case of anger. Again, contact with others occurs at the point where they also interact with their environment, having ‘intentions’ towards it.



The reader becomes involved in the estrangement from language as, at the same time, invented words are included within the text. The term 'overvisited', for example, does not exist in the English language, and yet the word does not disrupt the flow of the text. I seem to know what it means as a result of combining the knowledge of the meaning of 'over' and 'visited' with the knowledge of the context in which it appears, as something which, when someone does it together with me, can cause anger. The collaboration of factors which contribute to meaning mirrors the collaboration of the term. Again, both the signifier and the signified share the theme of collaboration.

This kind of open listening for meaning is in turn experienced by Jacqua, as she hears a sound in her head 'from a completely different direction'. This is a source of spatial confusion for the reader, but for Jacqua the place where noise comes from becomes increasingly the focus of concern, and source of additional information;

How did she know it was armor? Who in the world wore armor anymore? It sounded as if the wearer walked at a good pace. With each step the armor sighed and creaked, rattling a bit. In the background were the winter forest noises. [...] All she could do was listen. (p. 1)

These questions might be part of the reader's response, as s/he shares Jacqua's puzzlement with regard to what is happening. A pattern of involvement, or drifting together, and estrangement, or drifting apart, is tentatively established between Jacqua and the reader. Any fixity must be resisted in this relationship; detachment is as unwise as overvisiting. But Jacqua allows herself to focus on what she can discover. She will allow the layers of information to build up until they become a fuller, more meaningful picture.

And then, as suddenly as it began, the noise, or flow of information, stops. The story cannot be told. But just as doubt threatens to take over, help is at hand;

Jacqua grew impatient. She was only beginning to train herself. Perhaps she was making some mistake.

"You're doing fine." The thought was enfolding her. (p. 2)

Diana intervenes in the form of an ‘enfolding’, reassuring thought to restore Jacqua’s faith in her senses, telling her that ‘[w]hat you’re hearing is really happening’ (p. 2). Diana cannot be fixed on the linear model which placed Jacqua as monitor and the woman in armour as monitored; she is behind Jacqua, supporting her, but also between her and the core scene, attempting to bring the two together. The theme of collaboration is then pushed even further with Diana’s offer of co-operative perception;

“Look with me,” said Diana.  
They locked minds, Diana’s eye-seeing pushing outward and away, expanding with her power. (p. 4)

In this way the senses, whose ability to convey information is often thought of as fixed, and to be taken for granted, are stretched with the power of self-belief. This is shown to have immediate effect; the addition of visual to aural information facilitates the narration of the core story of Seja meeting the woman wearing armour, as Diana, Jacqua, and the reader, look on and listen in.

This first story uses the theme of layering to ease the reader into a position of empathic consciousness. It presents the story of the strangers meeting, balanced out with a scene involving friends who have become too close. Both of these narratives are filtered to the reader through the senses of first one, then two, women, whose foregrounded struggle to attain the details of the story echoes the difficult task of the reader. The difficult task is, nevertheless, made manageable, through collaborative effort.

The resistance to singularity offers a resistance to solipsism, and the theme of balance demands that in order to make sense of the question as to whether other minds exist I presume that others may ask it of me, and in this sense, answer it with the asking. I will develop this notion throughout this section.

The first two sentences of *WET* offer a contrasting insight into Connie's insecurities with regard to her perceptions;

Connie got up from her kitchen table and walked slowly to the door. Either I saw him or I didn't and I'm crazy for real this time, she thought. (p. 9)

Like Jacqua and Diana, Connie experiences sights and sounds in her head, but in the dystopian society in which she lives this is given an absolute and direct interpretation of unacceptability, of madness. Jacqua's doubt regarding the sounds in her head lead her to wonder if she was accessing information properly, or if she has made a 'mistake' (Gearhart, p. 2). Similarly, for Connie, the experience has to have been full and directly in front of her eyes, or she will regard herself as 'crazy'. Clearly, there can be no sense in which one can see another person's mind. Perhaps, then, to imagine they exist is to declare oneself mad. And yet what would this madness mean? It would mean that compared with other minds I am unable to reason. In other words, to declare myself mad is to declare the existence of other (sane) minds.<sup>61</sup>

As with the beginning of Gearhart's utopian fiction, this early section of the novel leaves the reader in an interesting position. For it is Connie's thoughts, the thoughts which Connie herself does not trust, to which readers are immediately offered access. Furthermore, it is the specific thought that Connie does not trust her thoughts, which introduces the reader to the protagonist's mental life. Access to this other mind is premised on uncertainty.<sup>62</sup> This presentation of alternate possibilities offers a fuller picture of the mental, allowing the reader to make up he/r own mind about Connie and what she may or may not have seen.

<sup>61</sup> For ways in which madness may be historically determined as a defensive move by those who wish to define themselves as rational and therefore not mad see Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity In the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>62</sup> This reading of a position with regard to other minds in *WET* contrasts with Nussbaum's reading of the ethical other in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, because Nussbaum's position is characterized by certainty. See Martha C. Nussbaum, 'The Window: Knowledge of Other Minds In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*', *New Literary History*, 26:4 (1995), 731-753. Nussbaum says that Woolf's novel offers 'a miraculous access to thoughts of the characters' (p. 741), and so demonstrates that the form of 'the literary text [...] alone permits us to have what amounts to knowledge of the mind of another living person' (p. 750). Indeed, Nussbaum has such confidence in this interpretation of the novel that she expresses her own certainty that 'this novel represents Woolf's own personal attempt to know the minds of her own parents' (p. 741).

Significantly, Connie's doubt is not paralyzing. Indeed, the thought occurs to her as she is walking to answer her door, where her niece is desperately seeking sanctuary from the man who has physically abused her. The hectic scene which follows, where the violent Geraldo arrives to reclaim Dolly, culminates in Connie's institutionalization. Geraldo blames the incident on Connie, and in the dystopian world of the institution, his version of the story is accepted as true. Connie is labelled mad, and her remarks and behaviour interpreted in accordance with this label. An interesting consequence of the conviction on behalf of the institution that Connie is 'crazy for real' is that she has no authority over her own mind. So, when Connie asks for a doctor to examine the injuries she received from Geraldo, her requests are treated with a patronizing disbelief by the social worker;

"You say it hurts you. Where do you believe you feel pain?"  
 "In my side. My ribs [...] Those are the worse places. The rest is just bruises."  
 "In your side?"  
 "It hurts every breath I take. Please?"  
 "Well, you do have bruises. All right, I'll speak to the nurse." (pp. 27-28)

Connie's reports of her feelings are treated as valuable only insofar as they offer insights into her mental instability. Her complaints of pain are given no credence in themselves, because they are interpreted in terms of the label of madness. Only when the external evidence of bruising, a bruising which Connie herself sees as insignificant, seems to substantiate her claims will her story be taken seriously. Yet still the expressed "belief" that she feels pain may be doubted. How is this possible?

In one sense such a doubt may be said to demonstrate the problem with strict logical behaviourism, which argues that to feel pain is to report it, and *vice versa*. Since it is clearly possible for me to say I feel pain when I don't, this way of explaining the way in which sensations work is overly simplistic. Again, when Connie says she is hurting, this may or may not be the case. External evidence, such as bruising, is the only accurate guide others can have. In another sense, such doubt suggests a refutation of Cartesian dualism, which argues

that I have a clear and distinct impression of all my mental events such that 'there is nothing which is easier for me to know than my own mind'.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, the doubt engendered by the scene in *WET* suggests that this may not be the case. Even if Connie is not lying, as the critique of behaviourism seems to propose, she may be regarded by the social worker to be simply mistaken about her pain.

This latter seems to be an interpretation which is more faithful to the text, and the fact that Connie's behaviour is seen through the filter of the institution, which assumes that she has no control over her actions and statements, supports this. The social worker's remarks seem consistent with this criticism of Cartesian dualism. However, rather than simply taking into account Connie's identification as mad, I think that such an identification is central to a philosophical understanding of the social worker's comments. Connie is being seen as a different kind of person to the rest of us. Her alleged madness means that her reports of her feelings are to be treated in a certain kind of way. One consequence of this is that her mind is not representative of others precisely because of her social status.

This is in part why the world in which Connie lives counts as dystopian. It classifies people according to pre-determined criteria, placing some people in a position to distinguish themselves from a collection of others, and to delineate the boundaries of those other people's thinking. In Connie's case, the social worker, along with others who work on behalf of the institution, believes that she has direct access to Connie's mind. Her position of power allows her to assume this access **against** Connie's openness, refusing to use the patient's remarks as an invitation to share her thoughts, lest this lead to her seeing something which is not commensurate with the prescription she already has. The social worker will only use information which has been presented in a way which fits with this prescription.

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<sup>63</sup> Descartes, p. 58.

In this way the dystopian power structure is presented as working against the collaboration which people can have with regard to sharing each others thoughts, cutting people off from one another, and preventing them from the possibilities of sharing access to each others' thoughts. As a victim of the system, Connie is not subject to these restrictions of mind. In fact we are told that frequently she 'knew at once things about others she should not know' (p. 43). She realizes that Dolly is pregnant when she comes back from Puerto Rico just by looking at her (p. 39), and she knew that her husband Eddie had been having an affair in the same way. But her gifts lead to her being called 'crazy' and 'witch' (p. 43). Such a labelling, on behalf of the dystopian world, may be fruitfully contrasted with Connie's own questioning of her sanity in the first line of the novel. When other people wish to label her mad, it is a way of making her otherness manageable, facilitating an automatic interpretation of her behaviour in terms of that madness. Whilst denying mental experience to those of whose prior mental experience it disapproves, such an accusation also interprets all subsequent mental experience in accordance with this label. In this sense, labelling others mad is revealed to be subject to Freudian kettle logic, since multiple propositions are offered simultaneously 'where only an "either-or" is possible'.<sup>64</sup>

On the other hand Connie's drawing attention to her own alleged madness is a way of placing her experience in the balance. If she is sane, then she did see Luciente in the outside world. On the other hand, if she is 'crazy for real this time', then Luciente will have been part of her imaginative experience. This once more may be said to reflect the absurdity of the question as to whether or not I can be aware of other minds, because it suggests that only if I am mad can I be aware of my own mind. To consider myself mad, then, may be to allow myself to conceive of the philosophical question "how can I be aware of the existence of other minds?"

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<sup>64</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 62.

The future world of Mattapoisett offers a comparative revaluation of the perspective of the mad. Indeed, Connie has been successfully contacted by citizens from the future world via her peculiarly receptive mental qualities. Luciente, the first person to contact her from Mattapoisett, describes Connie as 'basically good and wide open to others' (p. 57). She values Connie as 'an extraordinary top catcher' and says that in the future world of Mattapoisett she 'would be much admired' (p. 42) for her heightened intuitive capacities. This is, perhaps, due to the different conception which the people of Mattapoisett have of madness. For them, madness is a faculty of the brain, the achievement of a state from which one '[e]merges and sets to work again with harnessed passion' (p. 65). Respect for such a state means that the minds of the mad are not confined and defined, in the way in which those in Connie's world are, but rather are given more control over their thoughts, in order to fulfil their mental potential. Luciente says;

"Our madhouses are places where people retreat when they want to go down into themselves - to collapse, carry on, see visions, hear voices of prophecy, bang on the walls, relive infancy - getting in touch with the buried self and the inner mind."

These experiences have to be left under the control of the individual; they must be a response to he/r feelings. Crucially, this is because madness is a possibility for anyone;

"We all lose parts of ourselves. We all make choices that go bad....How can another person decide that it is time for me to disintegrate, to reintegrate myself?" (p. 66)

*WET* introduces us to the notion that there may be cultural blocks to our capacity for growing aware of the existence and possibilities of other minds, and that there are absurdities embedded in the question of whether or not I can be aware of the existence of other minds. At the same time, together with *The Wanderground*, it offers hope that at some future date people may become open enough to appreciate mental otherness, in terms of similarity in difference.



In both novels, then, a crucial response to the question about other minds is the implication of the questioner. S/he too must see he/rself as an other mind, if the question is to be made sense of at all.

## 2. PRIVATE LANGUAGE

The private language argument may be seen as Wittgenstein's response to the proposed Cartesian doubt of the existence of other minds. Wittgenstein argues in his *Philosophical Investigations* that the idea of a private language is incoherent, because by its very definition, there can be no rules for understanding such a language.<sup>65</sup> Viewed as a response to the question about other minds, it may be said to cite the existence of a functioning communication system as proof that other minds exist. I read the utopian novels which I have chosen to focus upon as participating in this debate. In them, communication becomes an issue of sharing one's mind. In *WET*, for example, Luciente describes various attempts of the community at Mattapoisett to contact another world;

"After a whole generation of communicating with the Yif, we are merely transmitting digital code. We think of the Yif as superrational, a world of mathematicians - and maybe that's how they vision us." (pp. 56-57)

Because language systems have a fundamentally public function, they must be positioned at a comprehensible level. This places a restriction on relationships, as Luciente acknowledges, in the sense that this level may be said to determine either participant's view of the other. And yet this level is not fixed, and Luciente takes this as a hopeful sign for she and Connie in spite of their mutual misunderstandings;

"We have only been at this a few weeks, and look how strong and clear we are talking. If we both work at it, we should hear better and better!"  
 "Work at it!" Connie chuckled, remembering Professor Everett Sylvester in bed, working at sex. Her body was a problem he was solving. He put everything in pass-fail terms. "You're crazy, you know that? If I'm not." (p. 57)

<sup>65</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), para. 269.

The view that language can be worked at, practised, and achieved, seems to be counter-intuitive, since language often presents itself as a natural mode of communication; like good lovemaking, you either understand how it is done, or you don't. In fact, Luciente's conception seems so unlikely to Connie that she reverts back to her assessment of madness. This may also take the reader back to the second line of the book; '[e]ither I saw him or I didn't and I'm crazy for real this time, she thought' (p. 9). The difference here is that Luciente is also implicated in the assessment of madness. And Luciente's positive interpretation of madness allows the reader to feel perhaps that here it becomes a shared possibility, rather than an accusation.

The reemergence of this topic draws attention to the way in which the private language argument highlights the absurdity of the question about other minds. But it also shows that the private language argument itself adopts this absurd quality, since it employs the skeptical perspective with questions like, "but how can you know that other people are following rules correctly when they use language?". In fact Luciente's approach to language rules, which follows a developmental model, improvements upon which will change the conversants images of each other, is far more helpful, since it offers a possibility of future 'interseeing and comprehending' (p. 56), terms for which, once more, readers have no ready meaning, but can almost glimpse the kind of communication to which they refer.

However, finding out what others are feeling has a negative interpretation in the novel, for example technologically, as the hospital where Connie is incarcerated begins a series of experiments on its patients involving brain implants to control behaviour. Post-operative responses are made to follow rules absolutely; they become acutely predictable, in the sense that they are controlled from the outside by others. But are they? Alice, for example, says that

her submissive behaviour is pretended; 'I just stringing them along' (p. 261). Connie also has faith that Skip's mind is not completely under the control of the doctors;

They had not burned out or cut out as much as they thought, she hoped. Something of Skip survived. (p. 271)

This uncertainty is crucial, because it distances the reader from the medical establishment which believes that mental content can be made to follow rules. For example, during a brain probe, Connie shares with the reader her thought that her brains are being scooped out like food from a can. This confidence alienates us from Dr. Reddings' conclusion that, when Connie refers out loud to eating, '[d]oubtless we stimulated an appetite center' (p. 282). Reddings is convinced that he holds the rule book for the language which the patients use to express thoughts, but the reader is not, thankfully, permitted this certainty.

The doctors treat the patients in the hospital as if they are machines. When the same doctor describes the procedure carried out on the first of their experimental subjects, Alice, Connie notes that

[h]e sounded like the repairman from the telephone company calling in to report on a job. (p. 202)

Reddings' communications with Alice are staged for the video camera, and apart from these scripted lines he does not speak to her at all. Most importantly, he does not consider her as someone with a mind like his own. This may be contrasted with Sybil who, immediately after the demonstration is over, offers both sympathy and empathy;

"Poor Alice!" Sybil shook her head. "She must be humiliated! Imagine playing up to that fascist because he presses a button." (p. 205)

The imagination which Sybil assumes is not only an imagining of how she would feel, were she in Alice's position, but also of how **Alice** feels given Alice's pride and strength of character, personality traits with which the reader is also familiar, having been shown Alice's previous behaviour (p. 145). This projection brings together compassion from empathy (not identity) and difference, to effect a dismissal of the suspicions that other minds do not exist. This

dismissal occurs on two grounds. First, because Sybil, along with the reader, can see what a confident denial of the existence of such entities can lead to, namely the behaviour of the medical staff carrying out the experiments. Second, because to regard others as people at all means continuing to assess them in terms of how I am, and how they have been. Questions like “but how do you know for certain” thus once more take on an absurd quality, because to know for certain that they did not exist is to deny my own existence, and to know for certain that they did exist, is to deny the uncertainty, and therefore the possibility. In these ways *WET* helps to highlight the ways in which the private language argument may be said to perpetuate the absurdity of the original question.

Like Luciente, the women of the Wanderground realize that communication is something to be practised. Nevertheless, the expression of their telepathy in the novel often seems to constitute an argument which questions the distinction between a public and a private language since, through being open, each woman may reveal her mental experience to others without speaking. Ijeme, for example, is able to relate in silence the story of her fleeing from the city (pp. 63-66). In this way, the women are able to understand each other's stories, privately, yet in communion.

However, there are sticking points for this kind of communication. The first is knowledge or assumption of the kinds of minds involved. The process of making mental contact is termed ‘enfoldment’, and is defined by Evona in genderized terms. Evona is clearly threatened by the demonstration of telepathy by the friendly men (gentles) in the city. She tells the men that whilst the powers of the women are characterized by care, their power is

“just another fancy prick to invade the world with. And you’ll use it because you can’t really communicate, you can’t really love!” (p. 179)

Evona is angry because the men have come too close to displaying a capacity which she associates exclusively with women. The reason that she accuses them of not being able to

communicate is because they have not followed her rules for who is allowed to communicate in this particular way. In this sense Evona is unable to recognize otherness.

A related difficulty arises in the attempts of the women to keep alive the memory of heterosexual experience. It is often considered to be the case in philosophy that whatever is conceivable, is thereby logically possible.<sup>66</sup> Philosophers who do not explicitly advocate this position often consider the fact that an argument is counterintuitive to be a strong objection to it, thus carrying forward the implications of logical impossibility for the inconceivable. In *The Wanderground*, the reader is asked to consider a future world where something which s/he might take for granted as natural or normal, is inconceivable. So, Jacqua reacts to a history lesson - a telling of our time - by saying

Love men? The idea did not fit. It was uncomfortable and backward in her mind.  
(p. 2)

For Jacqua, the notion of female heterosexuality is inconceivable. Though philosophically significant, this inconceivability does not entail logical impossibility, since female heterosexuality is a feature of an historical culture.

The idea that female heterosexuality is inconceivable arises again later in the novel, in the story of 'The Remember Rooms'. These rooms are where the children of the Wanderground learn of their past. Having been told of female heterosexuality as it used to exist, Clana reacts in a similar way to Jacqua;

Clana was still confused. How could you let someone enter your body that way and not be a victim? How could you ever want that to happen? (p. 158)

Once again, the consideration occurs within the context of a character's attempt to understand history. The connecting feature of the two ideas which the women struggle to understand is men. The women of the Wanderground seem to have a wholly negative conception of men,

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<sup>66</sup> For a full analysis of the issues involved in drawing connections between the two concepts see Stephen Yablo, 'Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 53:1 (1993), 1-42.

which causes problems when they wish to communicate with men, or when they wish to be open to memories which present a different view of relationships with men. This is made clear, appropriately enough, when the women of the Wanderground are in the city, masquerading as men. Betha, for example, on greeting the gentle Aaron, is ‘astonished and pleased to realize that he could respond to an enfolding of care’, because ‘[h]e was not a woman, after all’ (p. 115).

Recalling lessons from the Kochlias, Betha sees that its simplistic teaching that participants must approach each other in a certain way if they are to communicate meaningfully, is inadequate here, as Aaron forces her to ponder ‘What makes him a man?’ (p. 115). The recognition that the meanings of terms can change implodes the myth of direct understanding of a mental experience; of a private language made public. Significantly, it is when the women of the Wanderground live as men in the city that they are led to question their essentialist notions of subjectivity. The movement from one world to another, here eutopia to dystopia, but also in the Remember Rooms from eutopia to dystopia, brings out the process of defamiliarization and uncertainty. The application of the terms of the private language argument facilitates the next progression to possibility, since it points out that terms such as “man” are always in a state of flux; they are alive and moving, like Wittgenstein’s beetle.<sup>67</sup>

### 3. EMPATHIC AWARENESS

I will argue in this section that both *WET* and *The Wanderground* propose that empathic treatment of others is required both ethically and politically, but that in addition, they offer particularly sophisticated conceptualizations of empathy. I begin then with an exegesis of what

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<sup>67</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, para. 293.

is meant by the term empathy. I resist absolutely the mythic version delineated in the OED, where empathy is defined as

the power of projecting one's personality into (and so fully comprehending) the object of contemplation,

and adopt instead a notion of empathy as an imaginative exercise which involves placing oneself in an other's position. Or better, by empathy I understand the imaginative attempt to place myself in the position of the other.

Connie has different versions of her self in *WET*. The possibilities of the novel are related through the possibilities of her own being, and *vice versa*. In this novel, then, the arguments concerning the accessibility of other minds may be said to focus on my seeing others as myself. Connie is figured as a woman on the edge because her life conditions are fundamentally contingent. Luciente is a picture of the person she might have been in the future. Superficially, this highlights the effects of nurture on human potential, where Connie has lost out and Luciente benefited.<sup>68</sup> More significantly for my interpretation, is Connie's reaction to meeting the woman she could possibly have been.

Connie begins by positioning herself in opposition to Luciente. She assumes that the person from the future is a man, and that as such he represents a threat to her. Her considered response is aggressive; when speaking to him readers are told that '[s]he made her voice harsh'. The implication that any hostility is a position adopted, rather than felt, is emphasized further in Connie's response to Luciente's request that they might talk together back at her house. She says ' "No. Why should I? Who are you?" ' (p. 41), moving from rejection to defensiveness and finally, interest, in the space of a few seconds. Later, when Connie comes to know

<sup>68</sup> This point is made by Tom Moylan who says that Connie and Luciente are 'actually versions of the same character with one being shaped by the violence of the present and the other begin shaped by the nurturing of utopia' (Moylan, p. 139).



Luciente better, she expands the possible frame of comparative referends, to include the college professor from whom she suffered “mere” sexual exploitation;

Maybe he wouldn't beat or rob her. Just genteel slavery, like Professor Silvester.  
(p. 53)

Later, when Connie and Luciente discuss sex and reproduction, Connie begins to fall into the role of seducer to Luciente;

Like sunshine in her cell, he looked so human squatting there she heard herself ask half coyly, “Do you like women?” (p. 64)

But Luciente is mystified by the question and Connie comes to realize that the attempt to define the person from the future in terms of the relationships she has had in the past simply will not work. Puzzled by her own disappointment when she discovers that Luciente seems to show no sexual interest in her, Connie reasons that because she has created the person from the future, that person ought to fit into one of the categories she knows. In other words, ‘shouldn't a figment of her imagination at least satisfy her?’ (p. 64). Such a satisfaction would involve conforming to her pre-conceived specifications that she might, in the OED's terms, ‘fully comprehend’ Luciente. But this does not happen.

The satisfaction of expectations is most clearly defied when Luciente is found to have breasts. The shock which Connie feels at finding this out reflects the way in which assumptions about people are often largely based on gender. Connie has to reassess her entire attitude to Luciente, and comes to realize that her assumptions about gender differences are based on contingencies, rather than necessities;

Luciente spoke, she moved with that air of brisk unselfconscious authority Connie associated with men. Luciente sat down, taking up more space than women ever did. She squatted, she sprawled, she strolled, never thinking about how her body was displayed. (p. 67)

The recognition that Connie was wrong in her assumptions about Luciente's gender forces her to become aware of, and take responsibility for, gender associations which she makes. The repetition of particular verbs together with the female pronoun suggests that Connie has to

practise referring to women doing certain things in a certain way, in order for Luciente's actions to make sense. Even so, the assumption that Luciente's behaviour is "unwomanly" breaks through in this passage. Aware now that she is a woman, Connie tries again to fix Luciente in terms of who she sleeps with (p. 67), or in terms of how old her children are (p. 74), but the reader, with Connie, is encouraged to question the significance of such markers of identity. The lesbians with whom Connie associates Luciente, for example, represent a different way of being as a woman already present in her time. The difficulties with using the second marker are drawn out when Connie compares herself with Mrs Polcari, since differences in their social status means that the other woman looks younger than she is (p. 35). In response to Luciente's enthusiastic assertion of her ability to play the drums, it is said of Connie that

[s]he could not imagine any woman of the age they must share saying in El Barrio or anyplace else she had lived, "Me myself, I drum magnificently!" (p. 75)

From this point onwards, it is clear that the only way to make sense of Luciente is to appreciate the new imaginative possibilities which she represents, when this 'she' refers both to Connie and Luciente.

This appreciation needs must give rise to a serious empathy of commitment, which is demonstrated in the way in which movement between the future and Connie's present is facilitated in the terms of consciousness. This means that Luciente's presence in Connie's time and Connie's presence in Luciente's is dependent upon the coming together of their two minds. Explaining why future food cannot nourish Connie, Luciente describes how this contact works and what its limitations are;

"As in dreams. You experience *through* me. [...] If I was knocked on the head and fell unconscious [...] you'd be back in your time instantly." (pp. 78-79, author's italics)

The notion of concentration and effort are presented as crucial to this kind of empathic exchange; of experiencing through someone else's mind.

And yet the individuals concerned do not have absolute power over the process. In chapter fifteen, Connie's frustration at failing to find Luciente results in her visiting a different future world;

She had tried and tried to make contact with Luciente, but she had been unable to feel her presence all day. Finally, in a stubborn fury she had cast herself forward, demanding that Luciente receive her. (p. 287)

Is it Connie who has been unable to feel Luciente's presence, or Luciente who has been unable to feel Connie's? At this stage they are so accustomed to keeping each other in mind that it does not matter. The effect is the same; to secure their separation. Stubborn contact, which makes demands rather than requests from other minds, does not work. Instead, Connie comes across another possible future self in the form of Gildina 547-921-45-822-KBJ, whom, in contrast to Luciente, she immediately recognizes as a woman (p. 287). In fact, Gildina appears to be 'a cartoon of femininity', (p. 288) having gone through the numerous skin grafts and dramatic plastic surgery which make women acceptable in the future dystopian world. That this person is more recognizable as a woman than Luciente was to Connie reflects the danger represented by the dystopia in which Connie dwells. This is further stressed by remarks Connie makes connecting herself and this 'cartoon', noticing for example that '[t]hey were about the same height and weight', and that Gildina's surgically altered breasts resemble the image towards which 'Connie herself' had striven in her teenage years. And yet there is a distance in these comments, such that, for example, Connie notices the stifling effect which her body shape has upon the way Gildina moves, which suggests that part of a task of describing Gildina must at the same time involve an other description of Connie, as someone who, in another time, used to wear those fashion 'brassieres' (p. 288).

The knowledge of their similarity, as described by Connie, is also an awareness which comes from experience. When she begins to describe how she came to be there

Connie smiled with sophistication. It was almost fun. She imagined how Luciente must have felt laying down the unbelievable truth to naive ears. Now she was the visitor from elsewhere. (p. 289)

This time Connie initiates the sharing of worlds through minds, and this gives her a confidence and ease of being which is almost unknown to her in her own time, and even during her visits to Mattapoissett. Moreover, she is now in a position to reflect both on this future possibility for herself, and, at the same time, the future which is presented by Luciente, whose time travelling to dystopia to contact a mystified version of herself, she is now practising. Crucially, the shifting of roles does not mean that Connie now has knowledge of how Luciente felt visiting her. Instead imagination is invoked, to resist any notion of certainty, and emphasize possibility. By considering how Luciente may have felt, Connie refuses to appropriate her experience, whilst at the same time, allowing that experience as she imagines it, to inform her own.

The confidence which Connie feels in this situation develops as a security android arrives to threaten Gildina with demotion for subversive activities, and Connie tries to defend her presence and Gildina's status to him;

"I can only stay here through her. Gildina has a special power, even if she doesn't know it [...] Break my contact with her and I disappear." (p. 299)

Eventually it is Connie's confidence which startles the android, and necessitates her immediate evacuation from the world where she may have been Gildina (p. 300). Yet back in her world, the knowledge she has acquired of that possible world is acutely motivating. Now Connie understands its significance; '[t]hat was Luciente's war, and she was enlisted in it' (p. 301).

The movement which Connie experiences on her psychic travels to eutopian and dystopian worlds ripples on to a movement in her own life. Incarcerated in the institution, she looks forward to the meagre life of poverty she left behind, where at least she had her freedom;

she would rise in the morning when she wanted to instead of when the attendant came yelling [...] Nights of sleep with real dreams [...] Around her kitchen she would sing and dance [...] Her life that had felt so threadbare now spread out like a full red velvet rose. (p. 28)

Connie's utopian optimism emphasizes the significant effect which being in another place has upon one's vision of where one was and will be. The contribution of movement to perspective occurs to Connie not long before she is hospitalized, where she recalls moments of enthusiasm from her teenage years;

Yes, like the teachers she admired in her high school, she was not going to marry until she was old, twenty-five even. Like Mrs. Polcari, she was going to have only two children and keep them clean as advertisements. (p. 47)

Temporal perspective clearly becomes an issue here. Connie is thinking about a past where she had hopes for her future. Moreover, she is thinking about it in a scene which is chronologically prior to the scene in the hospital where she relates her utopian dreams of life outside, but which is related at a later stage in the novel. The effect is to stress the motivation of movement. Back in her apartment, Connie admonishes herself for her current apathy;

So who was the worst fool, then - herself at fifteen full of plans and fire, or the woman of thirty-seven who had given up making any plans? Despair had stained her with its somber wash and leached from her all plans and schoolbook ideals. (p. 47)

And yet the apathy of the thirty-seven year old woman is not current, since she is now narrating from within the perspective of the hospital. She is looking at what and how she has thought, and discovering a position for herself now. This is how empathy, including empathy with one's own subject position at different times in one's life, is presented in *WET* as a tool to rout apathy and impotence, and to incite movement.

Paradoxically, this is further developed when Connie finds herself without a subject position. In a chapter after the first stage of Connie's planned brain surgery, which begins with the line 'Connie was an object' (p. 302), Connie adopts a strategy of contemplating the gossip of the ward;

Somewhere in this fund of trivial bits of garbage [...] must be some clue on how to find herself again, how to fight. (p. 304)

Finding out others' thoughts about others, will be a first step to regaining her sense of self. The detail of the gossip is then listed for the benefit of the reader (pp. 304-306).

Connie's movements from mind to mind, from possible self to self, and from good to bad engender hope. They also bring tangible results; the drifting to otherness finally leads to contact with Luciente, whom Connie had been 'afraid' to contact earlier (p. 302), and the appearance of unconsciousness which her body takes on in the hospital as she visits the future, convinces the doctors to postpone the next round of experimental surgery. Contemplating others then, has finally led to Connie's 'first victory' (p. 324), and the empathic strategies which she learns as a result, facilitate her shaping of the future.

In contrast, the empathic strategies of *The Wanderground* contribute to the creation of the past. For example, although it is possible for the telepathic women of the Wanderground to protect themselves from the reading of unpleasant experiences in someone else's mind by using 'memory shields' (p. 23), Alaka says that

[o]ften they elected not to shield or to shield only partially as they watched so that they might experience a story, a description with more nearly its full reality. (p. 24)

To be fully open to another's mind, then, seems to entail seeing what they have seen, and feeling what they have felt. A most striking example occurs after the discovery that the woman found wearing armour in the Wanderground, Margaret, has just been raped. The slightest unshielded glimpse into her mind leaves the telepathic women of the community reeling. Such a glimpse has Seja, for example, falling into a rage during which, in a strange echo of Margaret's memory, she almost murders her lover (pp. 24-26).

The empathy which enables the women of the Wanderground to find out about the experiences of other women is fundamentally teleological. The method, and its results, contribute to the creation of the community's history. But the philosophy of history proposed by the utopian

society has few references to events as objective reality. Telling the past from the point of view of others is not to know how others have interacted with the world, but rather to know how they have seen that interaction. This is demonstrated in the novel by the use of theatrical and dramatic imagery to emphasize a highly speculative philosophy of history which literally depends on other minds.

The teaching of history in the remember rooms is carried out by the older members of the society to younger members of the society; by those with knowledge of a past to those without this knowledge (pp. 138-166). In this way the community of the Wanderground may be said to have a collective history, in the form of collective memories. And yet this knowledge is not knowledge of how things were, but rather of how things were for particular people. Knowledge of the past is thus nothing more than knowledge of stories, since this is all that the past consists in. This is emphasized by the technique employed by the teachers, or 'remember-guides' (p. 139), of beginning each of their lessons with a traditional language of storytelling; 'Once upon a time' (p. 140; p. 158).

That the narration is not a simple description of reality is made clear when Alaka speaks of Margaret's tale of her rape as one of many striking 'stories of outrage' which form an important part of the history of the women (p. 24). The story is of the response, not of the event. The women who learn about the past are learning that response, becoming, as Seja does in response to Margaret's story, a 'crazed and outraged sister'. In understanding the past perspectives of others they may create their own stories of outrage. In the middle of this scene the earth is said to halt for the story which Seja is constructing for herself and expressing to Alaka '[i]n a frozen moment';

It all seemed mock-heroic at first, and Alaka could almost hear a militant musical score in the background. (p. 25)



The story of Seja the hero, preparing to rid the world of all sex attackers follows. The irony is that this miniature mock epic tale is transmitted whilst Seja has her partner Alaka pinned to the ground, ready to kill her. The tale is separated from the rest of the text, and culminates in myths of separatist essentialism;

"It is not in his nature not to rape. It is not in my nature to be raped. We do not co-exist."

Seja, the woman-of-war. Seja, the righteous killer. (p. 25)

This nonsensical analysis could only occur in a period of stasis, and when it is completed, the earth can move again. From the position where the ground is once more shifting, it is clear that the two visions Seja has of herself are paradoxical images born of a temporary madness which deludes to a false absolutism and anti-philosophical surety. The moves to bring Seja out of this madness emphasize the problems of such a position, and their preferred replacements. The physical remedy is an act of pseudo sexual violence, which has two women jumping on top of Seja and Alaka, thus positioning Seja literally between, rather than in opposition to, other people. In this position Seja is forced to listen to what the women have to say, their presentation of what happens next in terms of options for Seja;

"Your choice, Seja," Beula was saying. "Your choice. We release you and you go free to do whatever harm you wish to yourself - but no other - or you yield to us here and let us hold you, give you earth. Your choice."

"Your choice," repeated Rowena.

"Your choice, Seja," Alaka sent.

The alternative offering mantra eventually releases Seja from the madness, from where she 'continued coming down for a long time' (p. 26). The height of presumed objectivity, which threatened to offer all the answers to the problems presented in terms of 'Margaret's ugly drama' (p. 23), has been left in favour of coming down to earth. Seja has been reminded of her place and restored to it, by being presented with the possibility of choice.

The women of the Wanderground, in sharing the horror and revilement of the rape victim, write themselves into their own history books. In this way, the history of the women of the

Wanderground is held together by memory; they understand by having looked into other women's minds.

The significance of this is clear from Ijeme's recollection in the city of the 'words of an early lesson: "What we are not, we each could be, and every women is myself"' (p. 63), a chant recalled and repeated by Betha, when she too is in the city (p. 113). This blithe echo of the OED definition of empathy is, however, not simply a revised easy answer to the problems which women like Betha encounter. This becomes clear in the scene where some of the women go to meet with the gentles, and insist to them that '[w]e don't come as representatives of the hill women, but only as ourselves' (p. 170). The absolute simplicity of the early lesson is further undermined with Tulu's report to the gentles that 'we could not find a unity among us on the matter of meeting with you' (p. 171). The chant is a shortcut, a summary, which suffices until further experience can be had of memory and imagination. These two, in the Wanderground, are presented as the factors which will make a more sophisticated empathic awareness possible. Learning from the past, through the memories of others, and imagining other positions, offer hope that the women of the Wanderground will not remain trapped in delusions of solipsistic omniscience like Seja's. Memory and imagination offer ways in which they might move beyond.

According to the two novels I have chosen, empathic awareness is, then, a crucial factor in ethical and politico-philosophical life. Seeing myself in the position of the other is a useful way of approaching the philosophical problems which begin with the question "how can I be aware of the existence of other minds?". It seems odd then, that Luciente informs Connie on their first meeting that in spite of many linguistic reforms, the language of the future retains the 'weakness' of the plural you (p. 42). For it is by imagining others as herself that Connie will come to see herself implicated by and active in, the war for the future. Far from being a

linguistic weakness, the potentials and possibilities introduced by the plural you is a personal and political strength. Luciente's mistake, as I read it, suggests another way in which the eutopian world of Mattapoisett does not recover all the difficulties of Connie's world, and also proposes a way in which the novel experiment of time travel may offer a new way of looking at language. In other words, the reader may spy in the surprising dismissal of the plural you by Luciente a way in which places like Mattapoisett, eutopian though they may be, can learn from the novel.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to show that feminist utopian fiction can usefully address the philosophical problem of other minds. It can do this by employing a philosophical progression from defamiliarization to uncertainty, eventually leading to possibility. And as suggested by the quotation from George Eliot with which I began this chapter, possibility determines the crucial philosophical contribution of the genre. It is this reminder of the contingency of our world which facilitates 'shifting the position from which [we] look', and in turn developing our theories about the ways in which we may look, particularly at and as others.

Just as my analysis of autographical philosophical fiction was, to some extent autographical, so this analysis of utopian fiction is utopian. In contrast to Kumar, who viewed the possibilities of human creation as inherently dystopian, it invests in the possibilities of configuration, not only in terms of writing,<sup>69</sup> but also in terms of reading. I harbour the hope that the resistance of binary oppositions will enable the consideration of utopian fiction as

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<sup>69</sup> Kumar's position on this may be contrasted with Isabel Allende's position in her essay 'Writing as an Act of Hope', in *Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel*, ed. by William Zinsser (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), pp. 39-63.

philosophical, and, by the same token, that the consideration of utopian fiction as philosophical will enable the resistance of binary oppositions.

In this chapter I have focused upon the analysis of the philosophical question about other minds in relation to utopian fiction. In the next chapter, which will constitute the final part of my philosophical story, I will go on to examine the philosophical problem of how people may know details about the outside world, through the genre of feminist detective fiction.

## Chapter Four

### Philosophical Detective Fiction

“The purpose of my display [...] is to demonstrate the difference between saying and showing. Signs speak. Pictures show.”

Angela Carter<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of the philosophical potential of detective fiction, with a view to discovering how it is possible for literature to be philosophical, forms the third and final part of my philosophical story. Where autographical fiction attempts to present a sense of self, and utopian fiction attempts to assess the possibilities of otherness, detective fiction may be understood to be concerned with discovering the world. So, if the second chapter confessed the story of the self, and the third explored the possibility of that self’s awareness of others, then this chapter will investigate the notion of that self acquiring knowledge of the world.

Historically, the relationship between the practitioners of philosophy and of detective fiction has displayed periodic warmth. Since the detective novel depicts, by its very definition, a process of knowledge acquisition, philosophical connections have seemed straightforward to some critics. Throughout this chapter, I will challenge this supposed straightforwardness. In particular, I will begin with an analysis of the critical relationship between traditional detective fiction and philosophy, which will undermine many of the assumptions of connection, before going on to present an alternative vision of the philosophical potential of the genre. I will then proceed to fulfil my vision of philosophical potential, by showing the philosophy of learning as it may be found in the V. I. Warshawski novels of Sara Paretsky and Barbara Wilson’s Pam Nilsen trilogy.

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 47.

## A. Traditional Philosophy and Detective Fiction

[A]ny writer who tries to make a detective story a work of art at all will do well if he [sic] writes it in such a way that Aristotle could have enjoyed and approved it.<sup>2</sup>

Dorothy L. Sayers argues persuasively that Aristotle's writings on tragedy may be aptly applied to contemporary detective fiction.<sup>3</sup> The title of the collection of essays in which it appears - *Unpopular Opinions* - suggests that Sayers considered this thesis to be controversial. In this section I wish to propose that certain connections between philosophy and detective fiction, radical as they may at first appear, in fact confirm the sterility and inadequacy of traditions in both fields.

Talk about traditions and the traditional often involves certain generalization and skirting over of differences. In an attempt to negotiate this risk, I will ground my analysis in specific examples, namely Plato's *Theaetetus* and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four*. In taking these texts as representative of traditions in both fields, I am not discounting the possibility of diversity, but rather hoping to draw a general pattern of connections. Inevitably, this involves some element of myth, particularly in my discussion of the figure which I call the "superhero philosopher-detective". I defend this on two counts. First of all, there is a history of mythical analyses of the detective story, and conforming to that tradition makes my deconstruction of tradition all the more effective; a way of fighting fire with fire.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, I take the mythical tendencies as I see them to provide an imaginative and useful basis for my alternative vision of this genre's philosophical potential.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Aristotle On Detective Fiction', in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Gollancz, 1946), pp. 178-190 (p. 190).

<sup>3</sup> Sayers is not the only critic to employ Aristotelian aesthetics in defence of detective fiction. See for example W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber, 1963), pp. 146-158.

<sup>4</sup> For an outline of the use of mythic criticism in detective fiction theory see George N. Dove, 'The Criticism of Detective Fiction', in *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Robin W. Winks (Prentice-Hall, NJ: Spectrum, 1980), pp. 203-208.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the power of myth as a feminist strategy see Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 165-196.

Umberto Eco's conception of the connection between philosophy and detective fiction provides a useful starting point. Eco asserts starkly, yet cryptically, that

the fundamental question of philosophy [...] is the same as the question of the detective novel; who is guilty? To know this (to think you know this), you have to conjecture that all the events have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them.<sup>6</sup>

I take from this assertion the suggestion that features of detective fiction have philosophical correlatives. This notion has interesting implications which are not drawn out by Eco, but which I now wish to explore. The connective features between detective fiction and philosophy may be said to consist most clearly of a question and an answer, or a crime and its solution. These elements themselves necessitate intellectual contribution, in the form of a 'conjectur[or]', whose role in turn demands an audience. These features may be described in such a way that they define the content and purpose of both philosophy in general and the literary genre. In philosophical terms, they form the substance of the genre - without them, it would not be what it is, but rather would be something else. In this section I will investigate each aspect in turn, examining the sense and extent of connections between traditional philosophy and traditional detective fiction through them.

## 1. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The first feature of the substantive definition is then, the puzzle, which often, though not inevitably, takes the form of a crime. In traditional detective fiction, the puzzle represents a situation of chaos which the story must leave ordered. In other words, the story is the tale of a restoration to order, in the form of a solving of the 'artificial and external problem' represented by the puzzle.<sup>7</sup> In *The Sign of Four*, for example, Miss Morstan visits Holmes and Watson in

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<sup>6</sup> Umberto Eco, 'The Detective Metaphysic', in *Reflections On The Name of the Rose*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), pp. 54-58 (p. 54).

<sup>7</sup> Colin Watson, *Snobbery With Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 42.



their Baker Street rooms, to confront them with her tale of a missing father and an anonymous message which she has received.<sup>8</sup> Neither Holmes nor Watson had previous knowledge of her, and so have no particular interest in the outcome, as yet. As a result of her visit, the goal of the text is to solve the mystery as she presents it and on her behalf. Other mysteries introduced into the text suggesting that her inheritance may not be rightfully hers, as for example when Major Sholto tells his sons that

[w]hen in India, [Captain Morstan] and I, through a remarkable chain of circumstances, came into possession of a considerable treasure, (p. 34)

are ignored by Holmes and Watson, who still consider the restitution of the 'treasure' to Miss Morstan as a 'secur[ing of] her rights' (p. 39). The specificities of colonial exploitation are not to be investigated here, and will only be discovered partially and incidentally.<sup>9</sup> Also deemed unworthy of investigation is the fate of the servant who claimed to have seen Sholto killing Morstan, but assured the Major that he wouldn't breathe a word to anyone (p. 35). Like the woman deserted by Small (p. 113), this character's story is deemed peripheral to the detection, and so is not inquired after by the investigators.

Since the mysteries are to remain within the control of the detective, they must not be allowed to expand beyond the imminently solvable. Questions like "why did high ranking members of the British army believe themselves to be justified in looting India's national treasures?" will be snipped away to leave the neat, more straightforward puzzle of Miss Morstan's communiqués. In this sense the disorder in traditional detective fiction is made into comfortable, "bite-sized" pieces, that the detective, and the reader, might cope with it more easily. It is defined and confined within the detective's terms, as he decides what is worthy of investigation, and proceeds to investigate just that. This process of choosing the puzzle is hidden and unacknowledged, because the puzzle appears merely to have presented itself, in the form of

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<sup>8</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 18-21. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>9</sup> The story of the appropriation of the treasure is narrated by Jonathan Small in *The Sign of Four*, pp. 113-136.

Miss Morstan's testimony. Yet Holmes's enthusiastic response to the quality of information provided by her betrays the correspondence between them; when she produces the specific documentary evidence which he enquired after, he tells her

You are certainly a model client. You have the correct intuition. Let us see now.  
(p. 20)

Miss Morstan is the ideal initiator of a puzzle because she has told him everything he might want to hear in order to be able to construct a narrow teleological programme of detection. Nevertheless, closer examination reveals a much more complex interweaving of puzzles.

Translated into philosophical terms, the puzzle becomes represented by the philosophical problem. In Plato's *Theaetetus* the puzzle is the question - what is knowledge? Philosophy, like detective fiction, may be said to presume disorder, enter because of that disorder, and seek to overcome it. Moreover, like detective fiction, philosophy may distinguish itself from disorder, whilst at the same time defining what counts as disorder. Just as traditional detective novels assume that the problems against which they define themselves would be regarded by everyone in the same way, the texts of philosophy may assume that the questions they pose, they pose on behalf of everyone else; that anyone who is interested in philosophical problems will perceive them in the same light, and that all such people will share their desire to overcome those problems in the same way. So, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates says that they can allow for two outcomes of their philosophical discussion;

either we'll find what we're after, or we'll be less inclined to think we know what we don't in fact know at all.<sup>10</sup>

In fact there may be other possibilities; for example that they know, but cannot articulate in the current context, what knowledge means. By ignoring this and other possibilities Socrates not only moulds the discussion but also seeks to define exhaustively all conceivable outcomes of that discussion in an attempt to make the question "what is knowledge" manageable, a

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<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. by John McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 187c. Subsequent paragraph references will be given in the text.

requirement which it may not satisfy. The attempt to delineate what counts as an appropriate response to the philosophical question is restrictive in the same way that the attempt of the detective to determine a simplistic picture of the puzzle presented to him is restrictive.

Related to this is the suggestion that traditional philosophy may be said to ignore the context of human relations, and the philosopher's own human position, in order to concentrate on a pre-defined way of approaching philosophical questions. For example, Socrates says that a philosopher is open to a question of 'what, exactly, a man is', but that

he's oblivious not only of what he's doing, but almost of whether he's a man or some other creature. (174b)

Similarly, Sherlock responds to Watson's remarks on Miss Morstan's beauty by insisting that, because of his profession, he never notices such things;

"A client is to me a mere unit, a factor in the problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning." (p. 21)

Socrates' role as philosopher and Holmes's role as detective demand that they reduce everything to factors of the sort to which they are accustomed, that is, to terms of the puzzle as they see it, and its projected solution. Excluding aspects which they regard as trivial or unnecessary is another mechanism by which the philosopher and the detective control the puzzle, and which paradoxically may contribute to their failure. As I showed in Chapter Two, the philosophical analyses of subject positions can benefit from personal contributions in the form of autographies. Holmes's unnecessary exclusion of all things emotional may similarly inhibit his learning.

Traditionally, the puzzle is introduced into detective fiction that it might be solved. In other words, the fact that there is a problem necessitates a solution. Part of the popular appeal of traditional detective stories has undoubtedly been their escapist qualities; that they offer closure

in the form of a restoration to social order.<sup>11</sup> The crime exists to be solved, and the detective exists to solve it. If the detective is unable to solve the crime, then he has failed as a detective, and the story has failed as a detective story. All loose ends must be tied, everything explained. The solution in traditional detective fiction is conceived as a definitive answer to all the problems posed by the text, facilitating a return to the state of grace evident before the problem arose. In the terms of an Aristotelian interpretation of detective fiction, solution facilitates the essentially cathartic experience involved in the reading of detective fiction. It is perhaps for this reason that Julian Symons argues that detective novels 'assert [...] the static nature of society',<sup>12</sup> and Eric Routley insists that the genre may be defended in terms of its reactionary status.<sup>13</sup> In *The Sign of Four*, this stasis figures as a weary circularity, which sees Holmes taking drugs from boredom at the beginning and at the end of the novel. The return to the beginning is a sign that Holmes has successfully restored order as usual.

In the detective story, there may be debate/ legitimate differences of opinion as to how order is restored, but not that the restoration of order is ultimately desirable. The reader's attitude to the puzzle - that it must be solved - is assumed and reinforced by the text. This strictly dichotomous attitude of detective fiction to order and disorder has also infiltrated the theory of the genre. For example, Jessica Mann remarks;

Certainly there can be no disagreement with the view that the crime novel reflects - rather than tries to alter - the society in which and for which it is written.<sup>14</sup>

The hostility to disagreement is twofold here. Firstly, the projected morality of the fiction is unquestionable, since the story is merely showing the facts about society, and as such has no responsibility for the vision of the text, which must be true. In this way the novel's insistence on its descriptive nature is precisely what makes its ideology **prescriptive**. Secondly, Mann

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account of the conservative sociology pervasive throughout traditional detective fiction see Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology In Crime Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder, From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Erik Routley, *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story: A Personal Monograph* (London: Gollancz, 1972), p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Jessica Mann, *Deadlier Than the Male: An Investigation Into Feminine Crime Writing* (London: David & Charles, 1981), p. 58.

forbids disagreement with her diagnosis of this feature of detective fiction. There is to be no debate here. For such texts then, fictional and theoretical, the reader is offered no incitement to read, but rather must expect to be told.

The philosophical correlative here is not quite so straightforward. Indeed, the notion of compulsory completion, and the suggestion of traditional critics that the detective story must have a particular type of solution, seems to entail an anti-philosophical attitude. For example, it may be argued that part of what makes a question philosophical is that there is no answer to it, and further, that a problem ceases to be philosophical when an undisputed answer is found for it, and instead enters the realm of science or art. A genre which guarantees an “answer” would not easily facilitate a philosophical interpretation, and indeed might usefully be regarded as incompatible with a philosophical outlook.<sup>15</sup> In the *Theaetetus*, a satisfactory definition of knowledge is not found, and so using his famous analogy of knowledge production as birth, Socrates labels the discussion a successful purgation of pseudo foetal matter (210b), and suggests that Theaetetus might return the next time he thinks he is pregnant (210c). In other words, although Socrates’ project as philosopher is to deliver a healthy new solution to the philosophical problem, the greater part of philosophical practice involves helpfully exposing the different, specific inadequacies of phantom pregnancies, or of putative solutions. In the terms of this analogy, having a solution is not a simple matter of celebrating when the pink strip turn blue, because there are more complexities involved.

As a result, although *Theaetetus* does not give birth, the dialogue is not entirely impotent, since it helps to clarify many issues concerning theories of knowledge. The failure of the parties to discover a definition opens the way to further debate, and once the debate has been opened, it

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<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that Ernst Bloch, in his essay ‘A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel’, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, pp. 245-264, diminishes the significance of the endings of traditional detective fiction, insisting that ‘many of the best readers read the last pages first’ (p. 250), and instead chooses to emphasize the ‘omitted beginning’ (p. 264) as the philosophical aspect of the genre.

may continue indefinitely, to serve as an incitement to read. It is for this reason that I suggest that the necessity and inevitability of a solution in traditional detective fiction has no philosophical correlative, but in fact is diametrically opposed to the aims of philosophy. This is a problem which must be overcome by any analysis which seeks to demonstrate that detective fiction can be philosophical.

## 2. THE PHILOSOPHER-DETECTIVE

Another element I identified as a feature of both detective fiction and philosophy, and which I have begun to speak of already, is the human element - the problem-solver. It is interesting that Eco himself does not mention explicitly the individual behind the problem-solving, suggesting that this individual does not affect the facts, but merely serves as an objective interpreter of them. And yet as conjecturer the philosopher-detective is allowed to reconstruct the facts in order to find out their cause. This person clearly is placed in a role of significant power, creating a world which he will dominate as hero, and yet with which he will remain fundamentally unconcerned.

Detective fiction is perhaps the only literary genre where candidates for inclusion must, uncontroversially, contain a particular character type. Our understanding of this individual dominates the genre.<sup>16</sup> It is obvious, but nevertheless bears repeating, that fictional detectives, like philosophers, have traditionally been men. Even when many successful writers of detective fiction were women, they were often creating male detectives. One reason for this is that the fictional detective inhabits a masculinist culture, which includes the stereotypical figure of the

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<sup>16</sup> For a history of the detective figure in fiction see T. J. Binyon, *'Murder Will Out': The Detective In Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

detective. As Eric Routley typically observes, '[t]his was manly stuff'.<sup>17</sup> Less crudely, Ross MacDonald points out that a

close paternal or fraternal relationship between writer and detective is a marked peculiarity of the form.<sup>18</sup>

The suggestion here is that the creator moulds his detective in his own image as a form of male bonding. By extension, women creators of detectives can attempt to emulate this relationship, but can never achieve it in the way men can. MacDonald's notion goes some way towards explaining why it might be that women writers and readers can struggle to find a way into the genre, without conforming to its masculinist ideology.<sup>19</sup>

This notion too has its philosophical parallel, as philosophy may be viewed historically as a kind of writing by men, about men, for men. Women philosophers can also collude in this restriction, by adopting traditional methods without questioning them. To question the hidden structures of philosophy which make it exclusive and limiting is, in Elizabeth Grosz's terms, to expose the philosophical tradition as phallogentric, as opposed to merely sexist or patriarchal.<sup>20</sup>

The traditional detective conforms to two types. The earliest fictional detectives often fall into the type of the aristocratic intellectual; an all-knowing all-seeing detective. Omniscient and aloof, this first type has been labelled a 'Nietzschean superior man'.<sup>21</sup> The other type is often referred to as the "hard-boiled" detective - a paradigm of machismo who is brave, smart, and able to assess situations and people with a psychic's touch.

<sup>17</sup> Routley, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Ross MacDonald, 'The Writer as Detective Hero', in *Self-Portrait: Ceaselessly Into the Past* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1981), pp. 113-122 (p. 113).

<sup>19</sup> For an analysis of the ways in which women writers of detective fiction may be said to conform to the genre's traditional ideology see Cora Kaplan, 'An Unsuitable Genre For a Feminist?', *Women's Review*, 8 (1986), 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> See E. A. Grosz, 'The In(ter)vention of Feminist Knowledges', in *Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges*, ed. by Barbara Caine, E. A. Grosz and Marie de Lepervanche (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 92-104. Grosz points to Janet Radcliffe Richards and Carol MacMillan as two women philosophers who have objected to the rising current of feminist philosophy, and seen fit to 'act as female guardians of male knowledges' (p. 96).

<sup>21</sup> Symons, p. 69.



In the interests of myth, the two types of traditional detective may be combined to form a masculinist representation of an all-round philosophical superhero. When the Superior Man meets with the intuitive, hard-headed second one, the result is an individual who seeks truth, and through a construction of truth - you'd better believe it, sister - will restore order. This is an individual who has the power to right the world with his reasoning, and is ready to break your legs if you try to stop him. It is a distinctly male combination of the man of machismo and the aesthete - two sides of a kind of philosophical superhero who lives by his wits and always discovers the truth, because he is defining, perhaps even conjuring, the boundaries and structures of that truth.

Socrates and Holmes most obviously count as the first type of intellectual hero. Socrates pictures his philosophical role idiosyncratically as that of a male midwife, delivering knowledge out of those who consult him.<sup>22</sup> Like Bertrand Russell, he connects his profession with the notion of a deity, as he asserts that 'for the delivery, it's God, and I myself, who are responsible' (150d-e). Again, he wants to be recognized as having divine beneficence, reasoning that 'no god bears ill will to men, and [...] I don't do anything [...] out of ill will' (151d).

At the same time, Socrates is characteristically modest, pointing out that an extension of his analogy dictates that, like the traditional midwife, he himself is unable to conceive (150c). However, this is not borne out by the text, where Socrates demonstrates his intellectual superiority and invulnerability. When Socrates persuades Theaetetus that he has been fooled by a relativist theory of knowledge, Socrates explains that this has happened as a result of Theaetetus' inexperience as a philosopher; it is 'because you're young; so you listen carefully

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<sup>22</sup> An interesting parallel may be found in the fictional detective Millicent Newberry's declaration that 'I might be called a mind-nurse', quoted in Patricia Craig and Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detectives and Spies In Fiction* (London: Gollancz, 1981), p. 46. Craig and Cadogan take this remark to be evidence of the 'conventional trappings of the genre [of sentimental fiction]' (p. 47), but in the context of my argument it may suggest Socratic pretensions.

to debating-points and let them convince you' (162d). The heavy irony of this remark becomes evident throughout the text as Theaetetus repeatedly has his individual thoughts and ideas crushed under Socrates' manipulative debating-points, and what is worse, must show gratitude to him for this;

SOCRATES. [...] don't you understand yet?

THEAETETUS. No, I don't think I do.

SOCRATES. So you'll be grateful to me if I help you to dig out the truth that is hidden in the thoughts of a distinguished man - or rather, distinguished men?

THEAETETUS. Of course, very grateful. (155d-e)

What else could he say? Socrates' method ensures that Theaetetus is bullied from open-mindedness to accepting the "truth" of Socrates' debating points, in whatever terms he chooses to present it.

Holmes also strives to make readers aware of his own genius. At the beginning of chapter three of *The Sign of Four* he asserts that ' "[t]here is no great mystery in this matter" ' (p. 23). Throughout the novel, Watson's emotional and intellectual mystification is doused by Holmes's unfailing ability to know what to do, and then proceed to do it;

"This is terrible!" I said to Holmes. "What is to be done?"

"The door must come down," he answered, and springing against it, he put all his weight upon the lock. (p. 45)

The addition of the practical to the theoretical is interesting, because it indicates how Holmes's character, although conforming strongly to the first intellectual type of detective, also participates in the second more physical type. His skill at amateur boxing, vouched for by one who has been on the receiving end of his blows, confirms this intuition (p. 41). Socrates, perhaps even more surprisingly, compares himself to famous contemporary wrestlers, justifying the comparison by suggesting that arguing is like fighting;

I've got more endurance than Sciron or Antaeus. Countless times already a Heracles or a Theseus, dauntless in arguing, has met me and given me a good thrashing, but that doesn't make me give up: such a terrible passion for exercise about these matters has infected me. (169b-c)

The adversarial approach to philosophy contributes to its phallogentric nature, by focusing on aggression and competitiveness as tools for philosophical debate. Janice Moulton has clearly shown how the “one-up-manship” and combative nature of traditional philosophical practices is not conducive to constructive debate, and discounts feminist approaches to the subject.<sup>23</sup>

Mentally, physically and morally superior to other characters in the novel, the superhero detective has an interesting relationship with the participants of the reading experience. In one sense he represents the reader within the text; he stands between us and the world of crime, from which he protects us. In a parodic reversal of dramatic irony, the detective provides us with an interpretation of the events of the novel of which the reader would otherwise be unaware. He reads for us, to save us from thinking. In this way the detective usurps the position of the reader. At the same time, the detective imposes his readings upon others. In the next section I will look at the ways in which the traditional detective novel includes an audience for the detective, who is made to prove that their readings of the world are inadequate, and so that the detective’s readings might be transferred onto others without challenge. Again, I will argue that this picks out a problematic feature of traditional philosophical writings.

### 3. READERS IN THE TEXT

Traditional detective stories may include within their texts ideal passive readers of the situation. Since the detective is the definitive conjecturor, the one whose investigations must be trusted absolutely, this passive reader represents a method of investigation which is somehow inadequate. In detective fiction, this may appear in the form of a police force, or it may be the “idiot friend”. The mental incapacity of members of the police force or the idiot friend to

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<sup>23</sup> Janice Moulton, ‘A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method’, in *Discovering Reality*, ed. by Harding and Hintikka, pp. 149-164.

figure out “who dunnit” effectively creates the gap which the detective will fill. In *The Sign of Four*, for example, Inspector Jones remembers Holmes as a ‘theorist’ who ‘lectured’ he and his colleagues on a previous case, which they were then able to solve. But rather than learning from Holmes for the present case, Jones calls for ‘[s]tern facts here - no room for theories’ (p. 54). Instead of theorizing, he urges Holmes to join him and ‘apply common sense to the matter’ (p. 55).

In detective fiction analysis, Watson is the paradigmatic idiot friend, to the extent that he effects the ninth of Ronald Knox’s definitive rules of the genre;

IX. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.<sup>24</sup>

Watson is a foil for Holmes, making Holmes’s detecting intelligence appear astonishing in comparison.

There are two philosophical correlatives here. Parallel to the police force, that mass of intellectual inadequacy, I may posit the silent majority outside the ivory tower, for whom philosophical questions are presumed not to arise.<sup>25</sup> Reactionary and static, members of the police force in detective fiction search for the easy way out of the puzzle, even at the cost of truth. They accuse the detective of making things too complicated, of finding problems where none need be found. Their thesis is that there is a straightforward, ‘common-sense’ answer to any puzzle, and if it fits, then it must be the right one. Socrates’ remarks about ‘uninitiates’ ascribe such an attitude to a particular social group of

people who don’t think there is anything other than what they can grasp firmly in their hands. (155e)

<sup>24</sup> Ronald A. Knox, ‘A Detective Story Decalogue’, in *The Art of the Mystery Story: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Howard Haycraft (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1976), pp. 194-196 (p. 196).

<sup>25</sup> A version of this mythic conception of non-philosophers is, for example, invoked by P. D. James, when she asserts that ‘in the pits of the inner-city area, where crime is the norm and murder is commonplace, you don’t get a moral choice, you don’t get contrasts between good and evil’, quoted in Barbie Dutter, ‘Crime Writers At Daggers Drawn’, *Guardian*, 16 September 1995, p. 7.

This works as a way of flattering Theaetetus and the reader, who immediately associate themselves in opposition to this group of fools, focusing as they are on the questions that matter. If this figures as the philosophical correlative of the ideal passive reader in the text, and the reader is encouraged to identify against it, it would seem that Plato's text is working to inspire active readings.

Insofar as the *Theaetetus* counts as philosophy, and philosophy is defined as incitement to read, this is indeed the case. However, the operation of the dialogue, which is restricted and confined by Socrates, in fact serves to inhibit active readings, because of Theaetetus' unrelenting concessions to Socrates' ideas. Precisely the same thing happens in *The Sign of Four*, as Watson accepts without question Holmes's interpretations of events. That the reader is to do likewise is made clear by the inclusion within the *Theaetetus* of the philosophical correlative of the idiot friend.

Whilst Holmes and Socrates display their own ability to reason logically, claiming that they are merely pointing out what is already obvious, it seems that Watson and Theaetetus are there simply to acquiesce and flatter. Almost as soon as they are introduced into these two texts, both Watson and Theaetetus are placed in hierarchical submission to their partners. Watson, for example, expresses to the reader in the strongest terms the admiration he has for Holmes and the investigative work which he achieves. He is prompted to remember the detective's solution of the first case of which he wrote, and assures Holmes 'I was never so struck by anything in my life' (p. 4).

In contrast to Watson, the paradigmatic idiot friend, Theaetetus is introduced by Theodorus the geometrician as his prize pupil to Socrates. Theodorus praises Theaetetus' exemplary intelligence and courage (144a), and encourages Theaetetus to engage in discussion with

Socrates (146b). But when Socrates begins their discussion by asking Theaetetus for a definition of knowledge, and Theaetetus finds he cannot think of a satisfactory answer, the young man begins to worry that his teacher has been over-enthusiastic about his abilities. Socrates assures him that his failure to answer does not constitute an admission of stupidity, and that Theodorus was not overselling his pupil;

suppose he'd praised you for running, and said he'd never come across a young man who was so good at it; and then you'd run a race and been beaten by the fastest starter, a man in his prime. Do you think his praise would have been any less true? (148c)

Theaetetus is not to feel inadequate, but rather is to come to terms with his secondary position. This is because in this discussion, he is pitting his wits against the 'fastest starter, a man in his prime', philosophically speaking. Theaetetus must lower his expectations and position himself within the role of the one who responds to rhetorical questions, allowing Socrates to win the philosophical race.

Socrates' position as consulting philosopher is unique, his art 'secret' (149a). Sherlock Holmes also asserts his singularity on account of his mental powers in *The Sign of Four*. He says

I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world. (p. 8)

However, Watson, being beyond the impressionable age of Theaetetus, is not quite so easily convinced, responding to Holmes's declaration by 'raising his eyebrows' (p. 8), and later actually being

irritated by the egotism which seemed to demand that every line of my pamphlet should be devoted to his own special doings. (p. 9)

This remark draws attention to the fact that where Socrates' dialogue with Theaetetus was dictated to Eucleides by the philosopher himself, Watson narrates his experiences with Holmes. Watson manages to share his reservations about Holmes's arrogance with the reader in a way that Theaetetus cannot.

The relationship between Watson and Holmes is an unequal one, as evidenced by the discussion in the first scene of their work. Whilst Watson praises Holmes warmly for his detection skills, Holmes declares his dislike of Watson's writing of a case. Watson is hurt by this because, he says, the story 'had been specially designed to please [Holmes]' (p. 9). Since Holmes has only a selfish interest in his writing, Watson generously indulges him in a - naturally one-sided - discussion of the difference between observation and deduction, in order to distract him from the cocaine which Holmes uses to occupy his mind when he does not have a case (p. 11). Watson knows that the only way to take Holmes's mind off his boredom is to have him talk about himself;

More than once during the years that I had lived with him in Baker Street I had observed that a small vanity underlay my companion's quiet and didactic manner. (p. 9)

Such remarks contribute to Watson's depiction as a nurturing, abused partner to Holmes.<sup>26</sup>

Watson's suspicions with regard to Holmes's selfish attitude to their relationship, are shared by Theaetetus, who tells Socrates;

I can't make out the truth about you [...] whether you're saying it as something you think, or just trying me out. (157c)

Socrates' responds by insisting that he doesn't think at all; as a midwife he is leaving that to the pregnant Theaetetus (157c-d). With this answer, Socrates can be understood to abdicate responsibility for control of a discussion which he clearly dominates. Although Theaetetus introduces, for example, the theory that knowledge is perception into the discussion, Socrates defines this doctrine in his terms, as the Protagorean thesis that man is the measure of all things, which allows Socrates to set the traps for the theory in its very outline. Further, Socrates adds radical instability as a necessary implication of the thesis that man is the measure of all things, and instead of criticizing the first argument, attacks this 'secret' doctrine

<sup>26</sup> For a light-hearted, seriously misogynistic exploration of this interpretation see Rex Stout, 'Watson Was a Woman', in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Haycraft, pp. 311-318.



of eternal flux (152c). In fact, the thesis that knowledge is perception may be made distinct from the idea that man is the measure of all things, and radical instability is not a necessary implication of either thesis. In criticizing the latter notions Socrates has postponed talking directly about the thesis that knowledge is perception, so that when he does come around to confronting the concept directly, doubts have already been implanted. The philosopher constructs the theory in such a way as to assist his critique.

Socrates' rejection of the relativism of Protagoras is interesting in the context of this construction, which suggests that Socrates is the measure of all things concerned with this philosophical argument. This is why he can respond to Theaetetus with remarks like '[y]ou've got it perfectly; that's exactly what I mean' (159b). The implication of the syntax of this remark is that the second half of this sentence is the semantic equivalent of the first; for Theaetetus to get 'it perfectly' is the same as understanding what the philosopher means. Later, Socrates admits that '[t]hat was what I thought myself, but I wanted you to think so, too' (185e), and Theaetetus keeps him happy by responding, '[w]ell, I do think so' (186a). Again, Theaetetus can win Socrates' approval by anticipating or echoing the philosopher's argument.

Holmes's use of Dr. Watson is similar in the sense that he allows Watson to guess incorrectly before he supplies the answer which will override all others in its veracity. He says to the doctor;

"What do you make of this fellow's scribble?"

"It is legible and regular," I answered. "A man of business habits and some force of character."

Holmes shook his head.

"Look at his long letters," he said. "They hardly rise above the common herd. That *d* might be an *a*, and that *l* an *e*. Men of character always differentiate their long letters, however illegibly they may write." (p. 22)

Like Socrates, he explains how he came to the conclusion he does, in the hope that his addressee will learn to make similar mental deductions. Like Theaetetus, Dr. Watson will fail to make any independent assertions which are not radically revised by his companion. And because of this these partners remain ideal passive readers of the texts, overawed and overimpressed by their teachers, and unable to see the world in any other way. The identification of the police force and the general public as the ideal passive readers, of whose intellectual passivity the reader must be wary, is then a red herring, as the idiot friend, or dialogic partner, confirms the necessity of passive readings of the philosopher-detective's perspective.

For the active reader, this form can prove most frustrating, since it restricts meaning before the words even leave the page. The philosopher-detective shows us something which, we are led to believe, was there all the time; readers were just unable to see it. This enlightenment does not affect the facts themselves, and so permits of no alternative interpretation. The passive reader has no choice but to accept the philosopher-detective's version of and emphasis on events, and so confirm his status as superhero.

The philosopher-detectives know all the answers, the reader knows they know all the answers, and there may be no challenge to their view of the world. Jessica Mann's remarks on the supreme confidence demanded by traditional detectives may be applied to the attitude of traditional philosophers with regard to their position;

long-lived heroes [...] must show an almost magical power, which makes them superior to the uncertainties and inefficiencies of everyday life. The true hero restores order without doubting that it is right and necessary. He undertakes the responsibilities of others, to whom he is superior.<sup>27</sup>

Socrates' story of Thales is reminiscent of this mythic individual; '[t]he story is that he was doing astronomy and looking upwards, when he fell into a pit' (174a). Socrates' point is that

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<sup>27</sup> Mann, p. 61.

the work of philosophy is so important that those who practice it may legitimately exclude themselves from that which they deem to be outside their field of interest. The story also, however, offers an alternative interpretation of significance, by including a criticism of Thales' ivory tower attitude;

a Thracian servant, a girl of some wit and humour, made fun of him, because, as she said, he was eager to know the contents of heaven, but didn't notice what was in front of him, under his feet. (174a-b)

I conclude that the superhero proposed by traditions in philosophy and detective fiction, who manipulates a story to massage his own ego, has a stultifying and reactionary effect on each of these fields, and I propose his immediate demise, in favour of the kind of wit and humour expressed by the Thracian servant girl, who can use her class and gender position to criticize those who deem themselves superior.

I have tried to show that the connections between philosophy and detective fiction highlight and reinforce the reactionary function of tradition in both fields. In the next section I propose an alternative, which instead seeks to encourage development and growth through such connections.

## ***B. Alternatively***

In the previous section I showed that traditional detective fiction was phallocentric in ways which are comparable to traditional philosophy, and that certain reactionary features of the genre made it incompatible with my conception of the philosophical as an incitement to read. Yet just as I began this thesis with the conviction that feminist revisions of philosophy are both possible and desirable, I now hope to show how feminist writers might transform the genre of

detective fiction. Again, this is not an attempt to describe a type of detective fiction in any systematic way - the genre is so vast that there will always be counter-examples to any such outline - but rather it is a mythic depiction of the potential for the genre to demonstrate philosophical notions relating to knowledge acquisition.

Feminist writers may reclaim the literary philosophical by accepting but transforming the notions of crime, solutions, readers, and detectives in the detective story genre. Retaining these features of a substantive definition means that feminists can speak from a tradition at the same time and in the same texts within which they critique that tradition. Like feminist philosophers, feminist writers of detective fiction, by engaging with a tradition which opposes its political aims, may draw attention to the contingency of the tradition, and demonstrate the flexibility of the framework.

## 1. MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Feminist detective fiction may question the notion of crime and all its associations, adopting a broader sense of crime in order that unjust acts, as well as illegal acts, may be viewed as criminal. For example, whilst in traditional detective stories, that which is feminist may be regarded as illegitimate and undesirable, here the patriarchal system itself can count as criminal. Feminists can reclaim the moral framework to put it in our terms; our sexist society becomes part of the real world of crime, contributing to the disorder experienced by the characters with which the reader empathizes.

One of the consequences of this broader conception of criminal acts is that characters and their actions cannot be judged as simplistically; whilst it is a fairly simple matter to decide if an act

is in contravention of the legal system, there are more complexities in deciding whether or not it counts as unjust. These problems necessitate examination of people and their motives in depth. So, in contrast to the many stereotypes to be found in traditional detective fiction, in feminist detective fiction there may be more subtleties of characterization which the reader must work out for he/rself, evidenced for example in the ambiguous and shifting relationships which many feminist detectives have with characters in their stories. As a result, it is less possible to have assumptions about people and their actions without knowing the background and motivations of everyone involved. A fuller picture must be shown in order for there to be anything upon which the detective might make a judgement. The worlds of disorder and order do not declare themselves, and are not clearly differentiated. This means that the detective must show how s/he will make sense of the events with which s/he is confronted, rather than pretending that the problems are pre-determined and pre-defined.

As a result, rather than being presented and known at the beginning, the crime or puzzle may change and develop throughout the feminist detective novel.<sup>28</sup> It is a process, rather than something already in place to be separated and treated, and so the ends of the text cannot be predicted from the beginning. Invoking a notion of process allows the detective to acknowledge her own position in relation to the crime; how s/he will affect as well as effect the investigation. Similarly, feminist philosophers have often sought to show that the practitioners of their profession cannot afford to separate themselves from the uncertainties and inefficiencies of everyday life in their analyses of problems, because to do so would be to ignore how their background experiences influence the way in which they picture philosophical problems.

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<sup>28</sup> John G. Cawelti describes the development of the puzzle or crime throughout the story as one way in which the hard-boiled strand differs from the classical. See the section entitled 'The Hard-Boiled Detective Story', in his *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago, OH: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 139-161.

The reactionary effect of the completion enacted in detective fiction by the perceived necessity of an absolute solution would seem to be anathema to feminist critics. It is certainly at odds with my definition of feminism as an incitement to read, and of a feminist literary criticism committed to open readings and boundary breaking. Nicci Gerard, for example, argues that the 'consolations' of generic features like fictional closure are at odds with the projects of women writers, and, as such, a genre for which such closure is an elemental feature, namely detective fiction, is no longer a viable literary type for feminists.<sup>29</sup> In other words, for Gerard, to recognize the achievements of women writers is to reject the detective fiction genre. I would like to argue more positively that, perhaps by refusing to supply the absolute and certain solution which marks the success of the superhero, feminist detective fiction can provide a philosophical review of what an answer is, and what counts as a solution. Just as Socrates with the analogy of the philosopher-midwife revises the role which answers play in philosophical contexts, feminist detective fiction may revise the roles which solving the crime plays for texts which fall into the genre. As a result, solution can come to have alternative interpretative possibilities, proposing an ending which is philosophically significant, because it perpetuates a desire to question as well as an incitement to read. In the next section I will examine the way in which these principles are also made possible by the challenge posed by feminist detective novels to the notion of empathetic ideal passive readers within the text.

## 2. REJECTING IDEAL PASSIVE READINGS

Feminist detective novels may transform the notion of the ideal passive reader in the text in order to salvage the philosophical possibilities of the genre. If philosophical texts encourage the reader to define he/rself in opposition to ideal passive readers of the world in the form of the

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<sup>29</sup> Nicci Gerrard, 'Gunning for the Girls', *Observer*, 23 April 1995, p. 6.

general public, feminist detective fiction may encourage the reader to identify he/rself against the police. I showed earlier that the traditional philosopher-detective distinguishes himself from a conception of ‘uninitiates,’ or those who valorize common-sense at the expense of theory. I argued that the distinction is offered by Holmes in terms of intellectual superiority, and by Socrates in terms of open-mindedness, both of which are philosophically attractive qualities. However, I showed that in both cases the appearance of another passive reader serves to manipulate the reader of *The Sign of Four* and the *Theaetetus* into an ideal passive acceptance of the protagonists’ viewpoint, which is not commensurate with the philosophical incitement to read. In order to avoid this trap, feminist detectives must instead expose the police as corrupt as a result of their being ideal passive readers of events and situations.

This may be contrasted with the alienation from and opposition to the police force apparent in American hard-boiled detectives like Phillip Marlowe and Sam Spade, whose creators have often sought to emphasize the fact that they have a different moral agenda to the police force, and that the institution of the law in general is corrupt.<sup>30</sup> The contrast begins most clearly with the invocation of a feminist agenda. Women are alienated from such an institution in ways that men are not, and so feminist writers of detective fiction may expose the police force as a patriarchal hierarchical structure that is permitted to take the law into its own hands, and which has its supposed solutions sanctioned by a sexist society. Feminist writers may thus investigate the way in which the patriarchal nature of the institution itself engenders corruption, at the cost of the individuals caught within it.

The second point of contrast may be found in the emphasis on the problem of passive readings. Systemic corruption in feminist detective fiction may be figured not as a result of conspiracy or greed, but as a failure to read actively. In this way, feminist detectives may attempt to seek out

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<sup>30</sup> See Cawelti, p. 146.



and expose the ignorance which refuses to question in the course of their investigations. This is significant because it emphasizes the importance of the feminist detective's task in engaging with other people's way of seeing the world rather than regarding different visions as being simply signs of those uninitiated into their own way of seeing the world. Crucially, the ideal passive reader is in this way regarded as having a problematically different moral agenda to the detective, which cannot be neglected by her.

The figure of the idiot friend does not fit into my understanding of feminist detective fiction. Anne Cranny-Francis suggests that the preference of feminist detectives not to have partners is in part at least a defensive strategy;

The female detective [...] must work solo if she is to have the same textual authority as a male character.<sup>31</sup>

My response to this is twofold. I have argued that the textual authority of the traditional detective, where the investigator becomes a pedagogue, is undesirable from both a philosophical and a feminist point of view. In addition, there are good reasons for the feminist detective to abjure notions of partners in the tradition of the idiot friend. Such a character does not, as I have argued in the case of Watson and Theaetetus, represent part of a valuable relationship, but rather involves the exploitation and humiliation of the friend by the detective and the philosopher. It also functions to discourage active readings of the texts, and so is at odds with my conception of feminist detective fiction's participation in the philosophy of the incitement to read. In the next section I will examine the alternative offered to the traditional notion of the idiot friend by feminist detective novels, in terms of the way in which the abjuration of such a character affects the position of the feminist detective.

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<sup>31</sup> Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction*, p. 168.

### 3. PHILOSOPHIZING DETECTIVES

The feminist detective's independence contributes to the incitement to read in detective fiction. This independence is not the isolation of traditional hard-boiled detectives; feminist detectives are rarely cocooned in the way that Marlowe and Spade tend to be. Rather they may operate within a network of equally independent female friends, who are both helpful and reliable. The reader of feminist detective fiction may be placed in the position of being one of these friends, and so offered a more complete picture of the life of the detective. The detective describes her own actions, which the reader is invited to judge, to pick and choose moments of identification and agreement. Where traditional texts are often stripped of supposed superficialities, with only those clues which are deemed important emphasized for the reader, feminist texts may present the reader with a plethora of detail, from which s/he must piece together he/r own analysis of the situation. In this sense, feminist detective fiction allows the reader to conduct he/r own investigation.

One obvious way for women writers to challenge the anti-feminist culture of traditional detective fiction is to simply make the detective a woman. This might be seen as a liberal feminist solution; a formalist inclusion of women in a men's world. The need to question the tradition may be efficiently fulfilled by this gender-reversal. Yet because of the way in which many female detectives have fallen in line with the traditions of the genre, their altered gender does not fulfil the radicalization sufficiently. As Michele Slung notes of nineteenth and early twentieth century female detectives in fiction;

they were usually *overendowed* with feminine charms to compensate for their mannish profession.<sup>32</sup>

Far from exploding stereotypes, female detectives often confirmed them; for example, by exploiting the myth of the female busybody, paradigmatically captured in the name of Clarence

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<sup>32</sup> Michele B. Slung, 'Introduction' to her edited collection *Crime On Her Mind: Fifteen Stories of Female Sleuths From the Victorian Era to the Forties* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 13-28 (p. 17).

Rook's female detective, Nora Van Snoop.<sup>33</sup> For my purposes, then, the female-ness of the detective is a necessary but not sufficient element of a feminist detective story. A feminist detective story will have to challenge the whole myth of the superhero detective.<sup>34</sup>

This may be done by changing not only the gender of the detective, but also how she works; her approach and attitude to the crime, her methods of investigation, and her ambitions, as constant challenges to the phallogentric culture of detective fiction. In this way female detectives must serve to counter the stereotypes that women are constantly confronted with in our patriarchal world. They can do this effectively because unlike many traditional detectives, they are part of the real world in which they operate. These women are not superheroes who always know that answer, but rather face a day to day struggle against a system which not only does not want them to know, but also presumes that they can never know, and so should be protected from information. For feminist readers, the female detective is our crusading representative, fighting for recognition and information in a patriarchal world. Where the empathy which the reader has with Sherlock Holmes is motivated by intellectual pride, the feeling for the feminist detective's position comes from the way in which she battles to find out things which she is not supposed to know, thus embodying the incitement to read.

The notions of puzzles, solutions, readers and detectives need not be regarded as reactionary or anti-philosophical aspects of the genre. The feminist perspective on detective fiction which I have outlined releases the core questions of the genre in terms of the process of finding out, of getting from an unknowing state to a knowing one. And best of all, this process is described stage by stage, that readers might be shown how this happens, and what the process looks like.

<sup>33</sup> See Clarence Rook, 'The Stir Outside the Café Royal: A Story of Miss Van Snoop, Detective', in *Crime On Her Mind*, ed. by Slung, pp. 85-90.

<sup>34</sup> A similar point is made by Lawrence Block, interviewed in Marilyn Stasio, 'Lady Gumshoes: Boiled Less Hard', *New York Times Book Review*, 28 April 1985, p. 1, pp. 39-40 (p. 39). Block says, 'if they want to go into the profession seriously, women writers will have to change the myth itself, instead of trying to fit themselves into it' (p. 39). Although I agree with the general sense of this, I would not endorse Block's implied querying of the seriousness or the professionalism of women writers in the genre.

The philosophical interpretations which are facilitated by this approach will be far more effective than those suggested under the approach of traditional philosophical correlatives. The focus for my investigation here will be the traditional philosophical subjects of logic and epistemology; I intend to show that detective fiction may be philosophical in its analysis of how and what subjects can know.

Where traditional philosophers, for example Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, often treat these as isolated questions, I will show how the novels I examine will “complicate matters” philosophically, by their demonstration of the preconditions, contextual operations, and consequences of knowledge acquisition. The texts I will use are Sara Paretsky’s V. I. Warshawski novels, and Barbara Wilson’s Pam Nilsen series. By using as illustrative texts two detectives rather than two novels, this chapter posits a series of texts interacting with one another, thus appreciating the detective’s function as a connecting device between those texts. Once more, then, I follow the progress of the knowing subject, this time in terms of a demonstration of how it might be possible for that subject to acquire knowledge about the world.

### ***C. Feminist Philosophical Detective Fiction***

The *Theaetetus* attempts to produce an explicit definition of knowledge, which is abstracted from all context, and yet applicable to all possible cases of knowledge. It also begins from a position of skepticism. As such, it serves as a useful contrast, both with the notion I established in Chapter Two, that literature offers a philosophy of perspective, and with the notion which I established in Chapter Three, that literature offers a philosophy of possibility.

In this section I will argue that feminist detective fiction may present a challenge to the epistemological agenda of the *Theaetetus* in both of these senses, and in a third; that where Plato attempts to offer an *a priori* statement of what knowledge is, feminist detective fiction may instead offer a demonstration of the philosophical process which constitutes knowing. Thus, I will establish in the course of my textual analysis in this chapter that some philosophical stories may be usefully shown rather than simply told. In this, I share Wittgenstein's conviction that

[w]hat signs fail to express, their application shows. What signs slur over, their application says clearly.<sup>35</sup>

Detective fiction has the potential to investigate knowledge anew, to ask the kind of questions which have been side-stepped by philosophers following a tradition, and to ask them in a way which is both accurate and useful, as only theory in 'application' can be. This lends a philosophical freshness and freedom to the genre. Philosophically, as I have said, detective novels are about finding out; they present an individual's development from an unknowing state to a knowing one. In the first person, they offer a picture of knowledge acquisition in action. This can incorporate any number of epistemological questions, from the significance of the knower to the implications of knowing. The learning process offers a structuring strategy for the rest of this chapter, in terms of a first section on the contextual base for knowledge and the position of the knower, a subsequent one on methodology or logic, and a final section on the consequences of knowing. Although these are all very general questions, they will be analysed in terms of the detective; in terms of how the individual subject of the chosen texts can know. Together, these three sections will contribute to a picture of a knowing self, as painted in feminist detective fiction.

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<sup>35</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974), remark 3.262.

## 1. A CONTEXTUAL GROUNDING FOR KNOWLEDGE

[A]cademic philosophers commonly treat 'the knower' as a featureless abstraction. Sometimes, indeed, she or he is merely a place holder in the proposition 'S knows that P',<sup>36</sup>

In order to understand knowledge, do we need to refer to the knower in greater detail than as a place-holder in a knowledge proposition? If we do need to know about the knower, how much background do we need? Which, if any, contextual features are epistemologically significant? How do contextual features contribute to finding out? Traditional philosophers have produced contradictory responses to this type of question, by on the one hand answering chauvinistically; saying that for philosophical purposes the knower is male, and on the other labelling the inquiry meaningless; insisting that no contextual features are epistemologically significant, and that circumstances prior to the actual knowledge acquisition are not the concern of the philosopher, but rather of the sociologist and the psychologist. Yet some feminist epistemologists have shown that since knowledge acquisition is contextually defined, then the items acquired as knowledge will always bear the marks of this context. If this is the case, then any analysis of knowledge items must include a study of context.<sup>37</sup> I regard this suggestion as a radical development in epistemological study. It is also one which feminist detective stories propose as a grounding for their epistemological quest, focusing particularly on the individual knower. I wish to claim that these stories can be seen as texts which are concerned with the establishment and development of the notion of filling in the contextual conceptual gaps so often ignored by traditional epistemological inquiry. As a result, they are able to investigate aspects of the philosophical questions associated with knowing which are often neglected.

<sup>36</sup> Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1991), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> See for example Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

The first significant notion established by the novels of this genre is that contextual factors do indeed play an important epistemological part. Because traditional detective stories form a genre which is to a large extent plot-driven, detail is often kept to a bare minimum, included only in so far as it relates directly to the investigation of the crime. In the examples of feminist detective fiction I have chosen, however, the case is quite different. These texts offer a whole range of detail which the detective comes upon during the time of the investigation. Some of this will be directly relevant to the investigation, in the sense of counting as evidence, and some serves to give readers a rounder picture of the characters and situations involved. In each case, the detective's whole life for the duration of the investigation is documented; the story is the story of their lives at the time.

So, the reader is offered a familiarity with V. I. and Pam that is rare in fiction, and perhaps even rarer in relationships outside it. The female detective narrator leads us through the story, such that readers see and hear everything that they see and hear, and are given privileged access to their thoughts. The narrative strives to present these individuals as honest and direct, in particular insofar as they are willing to confide their vulnerabilities and weaknesses to the reader; they admit things to us that they will admit to no other character, for example, that they are scared or unsure about a course of action. This background knowledge is also allowed to develop through the novels, in terms of the way that the books constitute a series. They display a consistency, with each novel in a series including familiar characters in familiar places. Pam Nilsen is a twin, and so not easily separated from her sibling surroundings at any time, but the twins are also part of a printing collective, featured in each of the novels. Familiar characters are presented throughout the series, and relationships between them develop and inform the reader as the stories move on. For V. I. Warshawski, the familiar characters include Mr.



Contreras, the grumpy protective neighbour, Lotty Herschel, the friendly and efficient doctor, Bobby Mallory, the police chief who was a friend of her father, and so on.<sup>38</sup>

With consistency also comes connecting developments between the novels, as in *Bitter Medicine*, where V. I. develops an affection for a character's pet golden retriever Peppy. At the end of the novel Peppy's owner, confronted with his crimes, shoots himself, leaving V. I. to take care of the dog,<sup>39</sup> which will feature in the novels thereafter. Similarly, the three Pam Nilsen mysteries may be regarded by readers as volumes in the same book as well as separate novels. This is most clear in the way that Pam, having discovered her lesbian identity in the first novel of the series, is shown to experience the growth and development of this identity during the course of the two later ones. The same happens with her identity as a detective. In both of these series of novels, then, the knower and her environment are introduced as fully as possible.

Because the reader shares a background of knowledge with the detective, problems appear in the text as and when they are confronted by the detective. Narratively, this often means that the crime in the novel happens in the detective's immediate environment; unlike in the traditional detective story, where the crime is brought to the detective by someone else who is personally involved. The puzzle, then, is neither external nor artificial in these examples of feminist detective fiction.

Rather, in these novels, the tendency is for the detective to provide a new direct link to the crime. In Paretsky's *Deadlock*, for example, the investigation is initiated by the murder of V. I.'s cousin.<sup>40</sup> In *Killing Orders*, an aunt employs her as detective, and an old school-friend

<sup>38</sup> One reason why the film adaptation of Paretsky's books, entitled *V. I. Warshawski*, was so inadequate, and even frustrating, was that it confused relationships between characters, making V. I.'s cousin her boyfriend, and Mr. Contreras her landlord.

<sup>39</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Bitter Medicine* (London: Gollancz, 1987), p. 300; p. 304. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>40</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Deadlock: A V. I. Warshawski Mystery* (London: Gollancz, 1984).

from whom V.I. solicits information is murdered.<sup>40</sup> In *Tunnel Vision*, a co-worker in a political pressure group is the victim. In these and other works, V. I. is drawn into a mystery which is already part of her life before it is a "case".<sup>41</sup> Barbara Wilson too offers stories in the context of her detective, Pam Nilsen's, life. In *Murder In the Collective*, one of the members of the print collective which Pam and her sister inherited is murdered. In *Sisters of the Road* and *The Dog Collar Murders* puzzles come into Pam's day to day life, not into any separate life where she is essentially identified as a detective. In both of these novels, the view that the knower exists in a vacuum is rejected. A world exists around "S". But how is this shown to contribute to knowledge?

The inner life of the detective is laid out for us in the Warshawski and Nilsen novels, and it becomes part of the investigation. The reader is permitted insight into and analysis of the detectives' mental processes, a privilege which allows us to see how the working out of problems relates to the person who does the working out. One way in which this happens is through the detective's sudden realization of something, prompted by some unrelated experience. In *Burn Marks*, Warshawski introduces the subject of abortion as a political hot-potato being avoided by an acquaintance with sights set on Capitol Hill. The theme continues as V. I. is encouraged by this acquaintance to sponsor a political candidate on the basis that this candidate agrees with Warshawski's own pro-choice views. Next, V. I.'s aunt turns up on the doorstep out of the blue, drunk and homeless, with nowhere else to go. This reminds the detective of a time when her aunt appeared similarly at her parents' house, when Warshawski was a child. Unable at first to comprehend how her mother would allow someone in such a state to stay in the house, Warshawski is suddenly awakened to the circumstances of that visit

<sup>40</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Killing Orders: A Novel* (London: Gollancz, 1986). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>41</sup> The notable exception to this is Paretsky's first Warshawski novel *Indemnity Only*, where the detective is approached by a client in a scene which can only be described as parodic; a shadowy man offering a false identity appears as if by magic in her office, lit only by the intermittent flash of neon from the building opposite (p. 3). It might be suggested that this establishes Warshawski within a tradition from which she can then break free.

all those years ago, by the warning that the new home she finds for her aunt does not allow children or pets;

For the first time in my life I found myself wondering what Elena had done for birth control all those years. And I suddenly realised why Gabriella had been so accepting the time she showed up at our house thirty years ago. I couldn't put my finger on exactly what had been said, but Elena had been pregnant. Gabriella helped her find some kind of underground abortion and Elena got drunk.<sup>42</sup>

Warshawski comes to know this through a series of apparently unrelated events and comments. This knowledge is not simply acquired through experience, as the empiricist would have it, but depends upon connections made through the knower herself; the form and content of the knowledge are shaped specifically from her perspective. She had a feeling at the time when Elena came to stay with the family, which she could not explain. Then, when the memory returns at a time when issues of abortion are at the forefront of her mind, she makes the connection, giving meaning to the feeling, and eventually coming to know why her mother allowed a drunken relative to stay in the house.

A similar moment occurs in Barbara Wilson's *Murder In the Collective*. The story of the investigation is also the story of Pam's discovering a lesbian sexuality in herself, and so while Pam is finding out about the circumstances and characters involved in the murder, she is also finding out about herself. Pam's identity in this novel has a bearing on the form in which she is offered information. For example, Elena, a co-worker, warns her not to place an evaluative interpretation on sexuality, urging her to realize that

lesbians aren't one bit better than anyone else [...] They're jealous, they gossip and lie, they're promiscuous, they drink, they fight, they hurt people.<sup>43</sup>

Pam leaves the scene distracted by this self-deprecating outburst, and doubting her own self, as she enters the printworks. When Pam's partner leaves in frustration at Pam's preoccupation,

<sup>42</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Burn Marks* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), p. 30. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>43</sup> Barbara Wilson, *Murder In the Collective* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 162. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

Penny makes fun of her twin's first lesbian relationship; ' "Lover's tiff?" asked Penny, with what seemed like a sneer' (p. 164).

This condescending attitude forces Pam into a new awareness of her self as an outsider - her sexuality has become a new degree of separation between her and her twin. And it is this experience which leads Pam to a realization;

I suddenly walked out the door.  
Lesbians were no better than anyone else; lesbians were terrible people. What Elena had been trying to tell me had finally sunk in. (p. 164)

Pam sees that Elena was confessing to her, in a way only she might have understood. Going back to Elena, she doesn't need any further confession, instead asking simply, "But why?" (p. 164). In this way the two discourses, one about the crime and one about Pam being a lesbian, are shown to weave into each other, each of the discoveries counting as an epistemological framework for the other.

These examples of contextual realization reveal that seemingly unrelated items can share an epistemologically significant connection; their knower. Readers are shown how the knower processes the various potential knowledge items, in order to give them meaning as knowledge. In both cases the knowledge eventually achieved is revealed as peculiarly inextricable from the way in which it was achieved, and the knower is shown to have significant implications for the known. Coming to know in the one case, a mother's reason for putting up with a drunk in her house, and in the other, that Elena has committed the crime, is found to be crucially perspectival. It is part of a process of knowledge gaining which cannot be explained with reference to anything other than the detective's analysis of her experiences. There is a visceral quality to this knowing; both Pam and V. I. seem to sense something at the time, but have to work out on the page what that feeling signifies.

This may be fruitfully contrasted with the notion of tacit knowledge, which has been thought to operate in detective novels and explain the detective's mysterious skills at working things out.<sup>44</sup> This latter refers to knowledge which we use and display without conscious thought, for example, in the way that an experienced driver knows the highway code tacitly. The knowledge of V. I. and Pam in these instances is not tacit because in the first case, V. I. has no knowledge of Elena's pregnancy or Gabriella's role in the matter until she has thought it through in new circumstances. Similarly, Pam isn't aware of the "confession" immediately. The information has to be processed by the two detectives **in context** in order for it to make sense. Both of these moments in the texts show how understanding elements of the person, for example, that V. I. is a concerned believer in pro-choice politics, who was very close to her mother before she died, and that Pam is a new lesbian, can help us to understand how the two detectives possess certain knowledge items - how it is that they know.

The examples of feminist detective fiction which I have selected may be said to set out on their epistemological quest by emphasizing the importance of the context in which knowledge may be acquired; in particular the crucial role of the knower in this process. That knowledge may be acquired is supposed by the detectives in the novels. Indeed, this supposition is required by the very identity of the detective; in placing themselves in the position of knowledge seeker, they assume that there is something for them to find, in order that their identity in this case be meaningful. In this way feminist detectives reject the radical subjectivism often associated with feminist theory. Radical subjectivism<sup>45</sup> takes issue with the dominant positivistic stance in epistemology, which says that a decontextualized, ahistorical, impersonal proposition is a paradigm of knowledge. As feminists, radical subjectivists argue that this is a masculine perspective, which ignores other factors in knowledge acquisition traditionally associated with

<sup>44</sup> See for example Joseph Keller and Kathleen Gregory Klein, 'Detective Fiction and the Function of Tacit Knowledge', *Mosaic*, 23:2 (1990), 45-60.

<sup>45</sup> This concept, as I describe it, is closely related to the notion of 'Gynocentric Epistemics' analysed in depth by Jane Duran in her book *Toward a Feminist Epistemology* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991), pp. 71-157.

women, typically emotion, and intuition. So they propose instead the thesis that all knowledge is relative with regard to its nature and as far as its truth value is concerned, to the subject/knower. In other words, if I know something, it has meaning and is true for me, here, now. Radical subjectivists aim to reverse the masculine bias in epistemology, and re-value women's ways of knowing. Yet the resulting theory tends to be problematically both narrow and essentialist. It is respectful of the objective/ subjective dichotomy, even as it critiques it.<sup>46</sup>

The feminist detective stories I have chosen reject the dichotomy of objective/ subjective. As a result they find themselves able to locate knowledge in a contextual framework, and so allow for interpretations of knowledge items, whilst at the same time making sense of their role as knowledge-seekers, by positing some discoverable knowledge item which exists independently of themselves and other knowledge-seekers. In discovering the item, it is moved out of the world of objects, and begins to have meaning through its relation to the knowledge-seeker as subject. Knowledge is neither strictly objective, nor subjective. The dichotomy is presented and rejected in different ways, but always in the terms of the novels.

Perhaps this position is most clearly presented in the first Pam Nilsen mystery, *Murder In the Collective*. Having discovered that their friend and co-worker is under suspicion of murder, three responses emerge;

Penny [...] shook her head. "It's not important to me to know the answer. I'll support her either way."

"Pam," Ray said, almost imploringly, staring at me. I almost replied the way he wanted [...]. But I said nothing. I just didn't know.

"Well, I don't think she did it," said Hadley firmly. "And I want to find the person who did." (p. 129)

Penny's suggestion that the truth doesn't matter may be said to represent a radical subjectivism, contrasted with Hadley's objectivism. Pam's uncertainty places her in the middle, unwilling to commit to either extreme. Ray's response is interesting in its ambiguity.

<sup>46</sup> For a full analysis of this difficulty with some feminist epistemologies, see Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge*, pp. 62-104.

He has already expressed his belief in the innocence of the accused, but Penny's declaration of support, it seems, is not enough. Interpreting her subjectivism as uncertainty, he silently demands an objective response, though not from Penny, but rather from her twin, Pam. That they are twins is significant, because symbolically they figure as two halves of a whole. Ray expects one to be countered by the other, and through this expectation, reveals his commitment to dichotomous thinking. When confronted with a subjectivism he dislikes, he rejects it in the expectation that the only possible alternative must be objectivism. In this Ray demonstrates commitment to both the Principle of Contradiction and the Principle of the Excluded Middle. But Pam rejects the objective/ subjective dichotomy, and refuses to play her role in the drama Ray wants to direct. Although she is still working out her position, she rejects the restriction of the Principle of Contradiction and instead claims a place in the excluded middle.

In Sara Paretsky's novels the objective and subjective are also shown to work together for the knower. From a framework of facts and assumptions, Warshawski develops her own interpretations of events. The episode with the murder victim's daughter in *Tunnel Vision* is interesting in connection with this point because it is one where Warshawski speaks from a position of power (pp. 341-50). She has the words which Emily cannot speak. But this does not mean that V. I. speaks for Emily; rather she shares her language, tentatively offering her words up for acceptance or rejection. V. I. tells a story, and waits for the confirmation that her guess accords with what really happened. Emily's testimony yields valuable information; although Emily believes that Fabian has committed the murder, V. I. is able to work out from her statement that he would not have had time to do so, given the gaps between the two times that Emily sees him at home. Knowledge comes from the fusion of subjective and objective information available. Warshawski's interpretation of events is open for correction as more of the complete picture is discovered. The subjective contribution to knowledge does not override the objective, but rather works with it.



So, whilst feminist detectives, as would-be knowers, assume that there exists non-subjective knowledge to be attained, this knowledge does not present itself in terms of a confrontation with the detective as a subject. This is made clear in the way in which the would-be knower in these feminist detective novels supposes herself to be capable of attaining that knowledge. This is clearly a feminist issue, since it is historically the case that in our patriarchal educational system, for example, it has simply been impossible for women to achieve certain levels of knowledge, and even when barriers from education for women were lifted, the issue is not solved immediately; patriarchal myths of women's inferior capacity for knowledge are still projected by society and internalized by women.<sup>47</sup>

Penny exemplifies this in *Murder*, shortly after the objective and subjective responses to the possibilities and significance of investigation are exposed. Penny begins to share Ray's perspective of the excluded middle, and it makes her want to withdraw from the investigation;

I've been thinking about it and I decided that what you and Hadley have going for you is objectivity. I've got a lot to deal with on my own. (p. 134)

Penny has absorbed the blinkers of dichotomy, and is able to make no further distinction between Hadley's position and Pam's; between objectivity and not-subjectivity. Moreover, she has now spent enough time with Ray to have learnt to place patriarchal value-judgements upon each side of the dichotomy, judging her own subjective attitude as both inadequate and insurmountable, thus making her unwilling and unable to investigate.

In the same novel, Pam's confidence in her role as detective is not as immediately apparent as Penny's is on her behalf. She appears to be in a state of denial about the investigative project. When Sam wishes the group well in finding the killer, she replies, ‘ “ We're not the ones

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<sup>47</sup> For an analysis of the ways in which women have been excluded from the category of knower see Code, *What Can She Know?*, pp. 8-12.

looking”’, while confiding to the reader, ‘But of course we were’ (p. 63). Later when Hadley insists that they stay involved until they find out the truth, Pam claims cowardice; ‘“Murder’s nothing to play around with,” I said weakly’ (p. 174).

Yet as soon as Hadley leaves the room, Pam makes ‘[a]n orderly list entitled: MOTIVES FOR MURDER’. This time, however, she cannot even admit her interest and skill to herself or the reader, and insists that this is only done to keep her mind off less honest past-times (p. 74). She continues to investigate the murder.

In Pam’s case, then, her confidence in her investigative role is revealed in action. She chooses her role of detective, and sticks to it, even when she cannot acknowledge what she is doing. She wears a mask to protect herself, but her identity as a detective expresses and, significantly, demonstrates her confidence in her ability to know. The choice of genre here is noteworthy, because it lends an authority to the female detective; serving to tell us of Pam’s confidence even when she cannot. In contrast Warshawski is a professional detective, and as such states publicly her role as one who finds out; as a knower. In fact she is so assertive that she often seems very close to the fast-talking, masculinist hard-boiled detective of traditional detective stories. Yet Paretsky is able to use the limitations of this stereotype paradoxically to lend a revolutionary feminist and epistemological credibility to her detective. She is confident of her own abilities even when others are not.

The characters in Paretsky’s novels who do not have confidence in Warshawski’s abilities are usually male characters who are otherwise friends and allies. Bobby Mallory in particular often good-naturedly articulates what many other chauvinist characters are feeling, for example when he urges Warshawski ‘not to play around in police business’ (*Burn Marks*, p. 296).

Where Pam pretends to herself and the reader that she is not serious about detective work,

Warshawski is told this by others. It is an interpretation of her role which V. I. strongly resists, and which is used to taunt her on many occasions. Murray, for example, the detective's sometime lover and informant, latches on to her insecurity of being regarded as playing a game by ironically referring to her as a fictional detective. Yet even this is done genuinely and warmly;

Murray was grumpy for a minute or two, but his basic good nature won't let him carry a grudge. "What do you propose doing, Nancy Drew?" (*Bitter Medicine*, p. 275)

In fact, the notion of a fictional role model is taken up by V. I., who compares herself both to Harriet Vane,<sup>49</sup> and to Lord Peter Wimsey (*Killing Orders*, p. 137). V. I. reads against the grain of these role models, recognizing wryly that their investigative techniques would never work for the cases with which she must deal, and so succeeds in positioning herself as an active reader.

Pam Nilsen also invokes fictional detectives as role models, remembering the novels of her youth;

some of the happiest days of my childhood were spent at home, with [...] a pile of Nancy Drews.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, in the middle of another investigation, whilst staying at the house of a lawyer she has met during the course of the case, Pam searches for something to occupy her mind;

I had another beer and looked through Janis' books, decided they were too hard for me, and turned on the TV to watch *Cagney and Lacey*.<sup>51</sup>

Yet Pam does not absorb the show as mere entertainment. After viewing it, she describes how she

almost burst into tears. It was as if I understood the story on some profound level and was afraid of its meaning.

This may be contrasted with Pam's bafflement at a presentation of the speculations of academic feminist philosophy. In *The Dog Collar Murders*, as an addenda to the conference

<sup>49</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Indemnity Only: A Novel* (London: Gollancz, 1982), p. 151.

<sup>50</sup> Barbara Wilson, *The Dog Collar Murders* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 79. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Wilson, *Sisters of the Road* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 160. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

on sexuality, Miko holds a screening of some videos she has made, introducing and explaining them;

The third video was longer than the others. Miko said that it was called "Homage to Luce Irigaray," adding even more obscurely and helpfully for those of us who didn't know who or what she was talking about, "The [sic] Sex Which Is Not One." (p. 111)

Here, even poststructuralist feminist philosophy may be raised within the terms of the novel, where a text can be playfully converted into the subject matter of a porn video. Although Pam sees value in the way in which women's bodies were 'lovingly photographed' in the video, ultimately she

couldn't help agreeing with a woman nearby who groaned, scarcely under her breath, "Bor-ing." (p. 111)

Miko's interpretation of Irigaray does not help Pam to organize her response to pornography, and so remains for Pam a theoretical exercise. It thus contrasts sharply with Pam's active reading of the television show, and the way in which the latter encourages her to ask questions (p. 161). Active reading in this sense is not pre-determined by the cultural status of the texts with which the detective is confronted, and Cagney and Lacey may prove to have more significant philosophical implications than Irigaray.

As such, Pam's role as a reader in the novels offers a sophisticated adoption of role models, and so allows Pam as well as V. I. to identify as an incited reader. This helps to set up a pattern in the texts whereby the reader is encouraged to adopt the feminist detectives as role models. In this way they become crusading representatives of all women in patriarchy, operating within a tradition from which they are breaking free. This makes their confidence in their epistemic potential crucial to their feminist identity. They - and the reader - must be sure that they are able to place themselves in a position of a knower.

To summarize, feminist detective stories begin exploration of how the self can know, by emphasizing the importance of contextual features for knowing, and then establishing related conditions for knowing; first of all that the detectives believe there is something to be known,

and secondly that they reject patriarchal myths and have confidence in their own ability to know. But how is the feminist detective to go about acquiring this knowledge which she knows is within her grasp?

## 2. EPISTEMIC METHODOLOGY

“You know a conjuror gets no credit when once he has explained his trick; and if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all.”<sup>52</sup>

How do we progress from an unknowing state to a knowing one? How do we become knowers? How do we acquire knowledge items? If detective fiction is to be regarded as approaching these questions, then its texts must show the detective’s ‘method of working’. As Holmes’s remark suggests, this depiction may also contribute to the dismantling of the myth of the apparently magical powers of the philosopher-detective superhero.

There are many different ways in which fictional detectives work things out. I want to begin this part of my investigation by looking at the strategies for finding out from the perspective of logic in traditional philosophy, which may be sympathetic to the epistemological exploration of detective fiction. An important distinction in the philosophy of knowledge acquisition is the one between inductive and deductive reasoning. Deduction involves the application of laws and theories to experience, where induction begins from experience, and concludes with appropriate laws and theories induced from that experience.

Take my investigation into a serial killer, for example. Deductively, my reasoning might work like this;

Rule: Every dead person knew the killer's identity

Case: This person is dead

∴ Result: This person knew the killer's identity

Inductively:

Case: This person is dead

Result: This person knew the killer's identity

∴ Rule: Every dead person knew the killer's identity

The methodology of reasoning - how I go about finding out - is an area where traditional philosophy often connects with traditional detective novels. Fictional detectives often surprise and impress us by having knowledge which seems in excess of the facts as they have been presented to the reader.

Sherlock Holmes acknowledges this and puts it down to a certain skill of practised logic. In *A Study In Scarlet*, Watson reads out a section from an article which, unbeknownst to him as yet, was written by Holmes to describe his method of finding things out. In this article, Holmes diminishes the value of experience (or perhaps overestimates the role it can play in knowledge acquisition) in detecting as largely unnecessary for any 'competent inquirer';

"From a drop of water," said the writer, "a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other." (p. 22)

Holmes, then, makes a strong claim for deduction, one which seems to contradict a traditional philosophical assertion that logical truths can only be tautological;<sup>53</sup> to say that there is a drop of water in the world is not the same thing as saying that there are huge oceans. But even if Holmes is right, and deductive reasoning can lead to new knowledge, surely the instance encountered (the drop of water) has to be closely related to the result inferred (the ocean). It

<sup>52</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study In Scarlet* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 40. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>53</sup> See Jaakko Hintikka and Merrill B. Hintikka's interpretation of Holmes's article, in their piece 'Sherlock Holmes Confronts Modern Logic: Toward a Theory of Information-Seeking Through Questioning', in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 154-169 (p. 154-156).

may be that Holmes makes too great a leap from the drop to the ocean; as far as reasoning goes, there seems to be a missing link. How can we come to know of entities merely by knowing of their constituent parts?

Traditionally, philosophers and fictional detectives may be thought to wish to promote their professions as anything but ordinary. Yet here this may be seen as a problematic way of obscuring philosophical analysis. If readers are not to be shown how things are found out, then they will gain no insight into the learning process. Readers are left then with a mysterious move from premise(s) to conclusion which prohibits philosophical interpretation. In addition, Eliot and Chandler might argue that this mismatch of effect (knowing) and cause (reason to know) reduces the artistic value of a detective novel.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps one way in which this difficulty may be overcome is with the notion that the detective is displaying he/r specialized skills of finding out, using he/r detective's instinct, developed through experience. I have already shown how meaning can be given to seemingly innocuous events in a person's past, and that the experience of sudden realization can yield new knowledge about those events. Perhaps the detective develops a kind of sixth sense, and sometimes "just knows" about things that happened to others, too.

The function of instinct has been thought to play a particularly important part in female fictional detecting methods.<sup>55</sup> In this case, the drop of water may be subtracted from the equation altogether, with S just knowing about the circumstances of the crime. This type of knowledge may be formalized as that produced by abductive reasoning, where

<sup>54</sup> See T. S. Eliot's notion of the 'objective correlative', in his essay 'Hamlet', published in *Selected Essays: 1917-1932*, 2nd edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), pp. 141-146 (p. 145), and Raymond Chandler's objections to those examples of detective fiction, typical of the Golden Age of the genre, whose stories are 'too contrived', and as a result 'do not really come off intellectually as problems, and [...] do not come off artistically as fiction.' See 'The Art of Mystery Fiction', in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. by Haycraft, pp. 222-237 (p. 231).

<sup>55</sup> For descriptive accounts of intuitive tendencies in female fictional detectives see Slung, p. xix, and Craig and Cadonan, p. 16. For a derisive response to such intuitive tendencies see Dorothy L. Sayers, 'The Omnibus of Crime', in *Detective Fiction*, ed. by Winks, pp. 53-83 (pp. 58-59). For a more typically positive response see Jan Oxenberg, 'The Womanly Arts: Gossip and



a shrewd guess is a probable premise which, if true, accounts for the observed phenomenon.<sup>56</sup>

Abduction would deal with the earlier example thus;

Rule: Every dead person knew the killer's identity

Result: This person knew the killer's identity

∴ Case: This person is dead

Charles Peirce argues for the value of this kind of non-inductive knowledge. Interestingly enough, he does so inductively. He has an experience where a 'shrewd guess' yields knowledge, and so concludes from this that such reasoning is in principle useful. The story goes like this. Travelling on the Fall River boat from Boston to New York, he finds his pocket-watch missing, and believes it stolen. In order to find out who the thief is, he

made all the colored waiters, no matter on what deck they belonged, come and stand up in a row. There was something like a score of them.<sup>57</sup>

Peirce goes on to describe how he walked down the row of waiters, chatting to each one of them, and trying to get some feeling for the identity of the guilty man;

I said to myself, "Well, anyway, I *must* fasten on someone, though it be but a random choice," and instantly I *knew* which of the men it was." (p. 281, author's italics)

Peirce goes to some trouble to prove that the man he has chosen is the thief, and eventually, to his immense gratification, succeeds in proving that his instinct was right.

The abductive method is thought to apply to detective stories across the board, both traditional and feminist detective fiction.<sup>58</sup> On this view, the task of the detective in detective fiction is to come up with some clever guesswork, followed by the search to prove oneself right. Although simplistic, I think that this does succeed in summarizing, to some extent, the

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Intuition as Detective Tools', in *The New Bedside, Bathtub & Armchair Companion to Agatha Christie*, ed. by Dick Riley and Pam McAllister (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1993), pp. 261-263.

<sup>56</sup> Keller and Gregory Klein, p. 45.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Guessing', *The Hound & Horn: A Harvard Miscellany*, 2:3 (1929), 267-282 (p. 271). Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

<sup>58</sup> For a specific comparison of Conan Doyle's texts with the detecting described by Peirce in this article see Thomas A. Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok, 'You Know My Method: A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes', in *The Sign of Three*, ed. by Eco and Sebeok, pp. 11-54. For a broader application of fictional detective methods to the theory of abduction see Keller and Gregory Klein.

structure of traditional detection in detective novels. Peirce's analysis fits in well with my notion of the traditional detective as godlike, since he describes abduction at one stage as a 'Divine privilege'.<sup>59</sup> However, I hope to show that this is not an adequate characterization of feminist detective stories, where all kinds of reasoning are explored carefully and with greater sensitivity than Peirce's. Peirce acknowledges that abductive knowledge is not self-contained, and must have some reference to things outside of its equations, but does not give any detail as to how such references might be assessed. In accordance with the structuring principle I have adopted in this chapter as an approach to the problem of how it is that literature can be philosophical, I will argue that feminist detective fiction shows how this works, a process more valuable than mere telling.

I have established that context plays an important part in the epistemological experience of feminist detectives. As a result of this, context is found to contribute to the knowledge process - emotional contexts, for example, will, far from distracting, actually inform. As a result, feminist detectives may have a distinctive way of finding things out, every stage of which is played out for the reader. It is often noted that many feminist detectives use unconventional methods of investigation, and Warshawski certainly conforms to this pattern, epitomized by the trust which she places in the dreams which she has during the investigation of a case.<sup>60</sup>

In *Bitter Medicine*, V. I. acknowledges this process, hoping for 'the appearance of some brilliant idea in my dreams' (p. 231). Allowing ideas to occur to her in this way enables Warshawski to employ abduction to gain knowledge; as she says to Murray in *Tunnel Vision*, 'I have a hypothesis, but I need to test it' (p. 416). She can have conjectures about the facts, and then see if they are confirmed by her experience. That this method need not weaken her

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Sebeok and Sebeok, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> Warshawski's dreams are described in most of the novels; for a few interesting examples, see *Burn Marks*, p. 1; *Tunnel Vision*, p. 220; *Toxic Shock* p. 32.

confidence in her own judgements is made clear in the expression of the theory in *Toxic Shock*, where V. I. expresses her intention to '[g]et the facts, then shoot' (p. 112). In *Indemnity Only*, for example, V. I. meets Yardley Masters, who is congenial, even co-operative, yet something about him makes him an immediate suspect (p. 26). When her suspicions of him are confirmed, other characters are upset that they failed to have the same instinct about him; Ralph, for example, laments to V. I. that he

worked for him for three years and didn't see that about him. You met him once and knew he was that kind of guy. (p. 236)

However, her feeling about Masters does not dominate the investigation; it is merely a useful part of it. Her hypothesis about his guilt is proved correct in the end, but unlike Peirce, she did not set about the investigation assuming that this would be the case.

Warshawski, though confident, does not have the absolute overriding confidence in her abductive abilities that Peirce had in his. I want to suggest that this is a positive feature of her detecting techniques. I am troubled by the story of Peirce's search for his missing watch. I think it shows that abduction can be a dangerous game. Peirce says that there was no reason for his feeling that one particular man had stolen his watch, but that nevertheless he had this belief. Yet there is a method here; in collecting together possible suspects, Peirce consciously chooses men from all decks of the ship, so long as they are men of colour. Peirce denies that experience plays a role in abductive knowledge, but it seems clear that his background beliefs about people of colour played a part in his reasoning. That such criteria are used for deciding who is the thief might be problematized by Peirce's own prejudice is not considered, as he assures the reader '[t]here was no self-criticism. All that was out of place' (p. 271).

The danger with abduction as theorized by Peirce is precisely that it begins not from the premise of finding things out, but rather with the aim of proving oneself right. At first glance, it appears to be radical; the principle of abduction has even been referred to as

Peirce's 'law of liberty'.<sup>61</sup> Yet there are hidden restrictions on this liberty, at least for those chosen as guilty. Abductively, saying that "I know this", can be a way of justifying my judgements without showing how I came to them.

Now the problem with essentialist critiques which claim that instinctive - or, philosophically speaking, abductive - reasoning is a significant characterizing feature of feminist detective fiction should be clear. Abduction, as it turns out, is a way for the knower to close off other possibilities. When discussing autographical fiction, I characterized this exclusivity as anathema to my notion of feminist philosophical literature. Nor do I see it as a feature of feminist detective fiction. Feminist detectives rather acknowledge and demonstrate the dangers of both abductive and instinctive reasoning. Their methods involve a risk, every time.

In *Sisters of the Road*, for example, Pam has good reasons not to trust Wayne, but when she meets him, her impression is positive;

I couldn't quite reconcile his reality with the picture I'd built up in my mind. Playboy maybe, but pimp and hustler? No, he couldn't be. He was too cute, too friendly, too good-humored. (p. 74)

At the final denouement, Pam ignores still more external evidence and instead trusts her instincts about Wayne, opening the cabin door to him. She pays for this mistake by being brutally raped. But self-criticism does have a place here; she tells June ' "[w]e never should have gone up there alone" ' (p. 200). Admitting mistakes is another part of the learning process which is a characteristic of these feminist detective stories. Warshawski is also keen to learn from her mistakes. In *Indemnity Only*, after warning the town brute, whose beating V. I. is just recovering from, that she will not go away, she immediately regrets it, and tells the reader

I ought to write "Think before acting" a hundred times on the blackboard. (p. 113)

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<sup>61</sup> Sebeok and Sebeok, p. 10.

Feminist detectives, then, are fallible. This means that they have to test their knowledge. This notion is consistent with the idea of knowledge as a social force. It must be measured to some extent with the world. Feminist detectives formulate theories and then test them in the social world, that their theories may be gradually corrected and affirmed. One example of this testing of oneself is the episode in *Tunnel Vision*. V. I., from the premises of the atmosphere and interaction of family members at a dinner party held by Fabian and Deirdre, concludes that when Deirdre is murdered, Fabian must be responsible. The couple's daughter, Emily, is in a position to provide vital information about the night of the murder, but disappears. When Warshawski manages to find her, she wants to talk to her about the night in question. V. I.'s problem is presented to us directly;

I couldn't ask Emily - she wouldn't answer a direct question right now.<sup>62</sup>

The solution rests on V. I.'s shoulders. She must somehow guess what has happened to Emily, and in this way find out what did happen;

If I could work out what happened, work it out right, she might trust me enough to speak to me. (p. 342)

The crucial point here is that this suggesting of hypotheses is not about proving oneself right. It is about proving oneself trustworthy. And V. I. can do this by being open to the child's story, even when it does not fit with her suspicions. The desired result is that Emily be able to talk about her experiences, not that V. I. know what they were. V. I. finds out what happened to Emily on the night of her mother's murder, but only incidentally. By treating Emily sensitively, and being aware of her vulnerability, V. I. is able to share Emily's knowledge about the events that night.

Another way in which feminist fictional detectives might show their methods of finding out is by reference to evidence. It might even be argued, for example, that evidence actually offers or facilitates knowledge. Since evidence is a specific technical term in both detection,

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<sup>62</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Tunnel Vision* (London: Hamilton, 1993), p. 342. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

literature,<sup>63</sup> and epistemology, it might help to look at what I mean when I talk about evidence. What counts as evidence? What is the relationship between evidence and the potential knower? The classic notion of evidence is that of an object offering information - the proposition incorporating this idea would be "S knows that P because of A", where A is a blood-stained knife, or an engraved cigarette lighter. It is the object in a specific context of enquiry. In philosophical terms, however, the notion of evidence refers to an internal state, a belief, for example, that one has about objects.<sup>64</sup> The proposition in this case would be "S knows that P because of A" where A is a belief that the blood-stained knife was used to commit murder. The two conceptions of evidence seem very different. And yet both may function as proof of knowledge. It is with an understanding of this more general definition that I will proceed. In this way, I hope to bring together both senses of "evidence".

Writers of feminist detective stories bring the philosophical notion of evidence into their works, not by converting A from object to belief, but by focusing upon the human factor; S. This is one way in which feminist detectives manage to deal with that classic epistemological puzzle, the Gettier problem.<sup>65</sup> Gettier famously criticizes the common assumption by philosophers that knowledge may be characterized as justified true belief. He argues that sometimes belief in an item or event can be both justified and true, in other words seem to count as philosophical evidence, and yet the person may not be said to know that item or event. For example, I might set my video recorder to tape the boat race between Oxford and Cambridge. However, unbeknownst to me, the start of the race is delayed due to a terrorist bomb threat at Putney Bridge. To cover the airtime, the television company screen last year's race, which Cambridge won. This is the race which my video records, and which I watch that evening. In the meantime, the bomb threat has been exposed as a hoax, and this year's race begun and completed; Cambridge win yet again. When I watch my video tape, I believe that

<sup>63</sup> See for example the special issue of the *Periodical of the Modern Language Association of America* on 'The Status of Evidence'; 111:1 (1996).

<sup>64</sup> These are consistent with the definitions of evidence to be found in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. by Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 120.

Cambridge have won this year's boat race. Moreover, that belief is justified, since I have just seen them win it. And finally, my belief is true, since Cambridge actually did win. However, I may not be said to know that Cambridge won this year's boat race.

The Gettier analysis greatly problematizes the notion of propositional knowledge, or knowledge that P, because it requires better justification for our believing that we know something. It focuses attention on the quality of evidence, since it points out that although I may have had justification for believing that Cambridge had won this year's boat race, that justification did not count as good enough evidence for knowledge.

An important question seems to be "how might the quality of our evidence be improved?" In the terms of my interpretation, feminist detective writers have addressed this problem, and found that a possible approach to the Gettier problem is for items or events put forward as evidence to be treated in human terms; in other words with regard to how they relate to people, and how people relate to them. In this way my evidence can be constantly tested for how it functions in the world, and knowledge may be conceived accordingly in terms of a process.

In *Tunnel Vision*, a poem written by Emily becomes evidence to V. I. of her father's crimes. The poem, entitled 'A Mouse Between Two Cats', is printed in full (pp. 151-152), and is shown to have had a remarkable effect on the writer (p. 151), and also on V. I.;

I shivered. The furies raging in the Messenger home came to grotesque life on the page  
[...]  
"Do you have any idea when she wrote this?" (p. 153)

It is because the text seems significant that the detective will try to place it in a context, to try to understand it more fully. With this in mind, she shows the poem to a friend, and at the friend's suggestion they take the poem to a social worker to read it with her. Together they

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<sup>65</sup> See Edmund L. Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis*, 23:6 (1963), 121-123.



try to comprehend the implications of what Emily has written (pp. 164-165). The focus on collaborative interpretation is crucial here. Reading it together enables the three women to gain some idea of the meaning of the poem; of what the evidence signifies. Of course, it will not secure a conviction, will not, in a legal sense, prove anything. But the understanding of Emily which V. I. attains enables her to proceed with the investigation with some additional information about the emotional context of the murder victim's daughter.

The poem, as literature within the literature, also works to convince the reader of the power of reading. Its inclusion in the text works as evidence to the reader, providing a frame of reference testifying to Emily's character. So, when Warshawski says that she was 'thinking of the mouse between two cats' (p. 210), she reactivates the reading of the poem which saw Emily as the victim of two opposing forces. Emily's confirmation of her self-image (p. 341) supports V. I.'s interpretation of the evidence and shows her methods of hypothesis and testing of unconventional evidence working efficiently. This particular evidence can also signify progress and change, and towards the end of the novel comes to signal Emily's intelligence and surviving identity. As the title of the sixtieth chapter has it, 'A Poet Surfaces' (p. 459).

In Pam Nilsen's first investigation, a more conventional piece of evidence turns up, but is used by the detective in a most unconventional manner. In *Murder*, Pam and Hadley search the murder victim's flat in an attempt to find out what happened. They find a blue earring, and instead of placing it with tweezers into an evidence bag, that the evidence might stay as free from human contact as possible, Hadley puts it in her ear. They believe that in and of itself, the earring has no meaning for the investigation, and can yield no knowledge. What they will rely on is other people's reactions to Hadley's wearing the earring. This is unstated in the text, and as such is attractive for the reader, incited by this feminist philosophical text, in that it allows he/r to work it out independently. When the confrontation takes place, this reader opportunity to investigate intensifies, because the identification with the mission of the detective is strong, and yet the earring is still not referred to as being specifically useful

as evidence in itself. After Carlos's outburst, demanding to know where they had found the earring, Pam asks Hadley if that counts as proof that he and Benny killed Jeremy;

"Well, we don't know that for sure, do we?" Hadley remained at the mirror, swinging the S-shaped earring back and forth with a finger. "Yet, anyway." (p. 159)

When the other earring turns up, it takes them no further, and Pam has to arrange once more for a possible suspect to be confronted by Hadley wearing both of them. This time it leads to a full confession (p. 177-178).

My claim then is that such textual treatment of evidence serves to bring together the philosophical notion of evidence and the everyday or legal notion which seems to be of more direct relevance to the genre. It describes the former as a fuller version of the legal notion of evidence often assumed to be at work in detective stories - including the object as well as a context of attitudes towards the object. In other words, the quality of evidence may be improved by background considerations. So for example, in the case of the boat race, my evidence that Cambridge won this year's final was not good enough because I failed to account for the contingency of the event, and the way in which it might be affected by, for example, acts of terrorism, and alterations in television schedules.

Pam also gleans information in the course of normal - non-interrogative - discussions. In the last novel of the series, Pam pays visits to people connected with her private life in order to find out about the murder of the anti-pornography campaigner, Loie Marsh. She visits Elizabeth, her counsellor, and questions about Loie's background are weaved into questions about Pam's state of mind, and Elizabeth's attitude to pornography. Pam even feels that they are becoming closer as they chat, describing how she 'was touched that she was opening up to me' (*Dog Collar*, p. 90).

When Pam decides that she needs to interview someone specifically to get information about the case, to perform a serious interrogation, as it were, we are offered a highly comic scene in

a strip club where Nicky works. Unable to find her at another time, or to speak to her personally during working hours, Pam and Hadley have to pose as customers, putting coins into the slot in a darkened booth in order to activate the two-ways mirrors which will enable them to see Nicky in the middle of her erotic dancing, and Nicky to see them. They have a ready made sign to hold up to the mirror;

It said: NICKY COULD WE PLEASE SPEAK TO YOU DURING YOUR BREAK?  
IF YES MEET US AT THE FRANKFURTER ON THE CORNER AT 7 P.M.

She stared at the sign, then at us. Without changing the tempo of her dancing she nodded her head slightly.

"I guess we have to go now?" said Hadley.

"We've gotten what we came for."

"More or less," said Hadley. (p. 64)

Interrogating a witness has never been such fun. The parodic tone of this scene, where careful organization and self-conscious preparation are needed to arrange a "questioning session", serves to emphasize the casual and informal way in which Pam usually gets information from people. The traditional formalities are exposed and undermined. In addition, it emphasizes the way in which Pam's role as voyeur eventually leads to her solving the crime. Her willingness to take on that perspective, abhorrent as it is to her and to the reader at first, allows Pam to see how the hypocritical attitudes of many of the anti-pornography campaigners in the novel led to the Dog Collar murders.<sup>66</sup>

So, contrary to Holmes, Pam and V. I. show how being sensitive to emotions - their own and other people's - can yield important information; can lead to knowledge. Sympathy with another's point of view can help the knower to see things that might otherwise have been missed. In addition, the feminist detective's revealing their methods of working serves to involve the reader in the investigation, because the texts refuse to tell, preferring to show. As a result, understanding the detective as an ordinary individual is not the problem which Holmes suggests. Rather it multiplies the potential for philosophical application.

<sup>66</sup> For example, Pam's open mindedness about pornography and sadomasochism contrasts with the way in which Loie is said to 'construct an entire ideology around the things she was most afraid of seeing in herself.' (*Dog Collar*, p. 68), and with Sonya (the murderer)'s 'fundamentalist belief system' (p. 49), which includes homophobic and anti-choice positions.

### 3. CONSEQUENCES OF KNOWING

What happens after the detecting is done? What do I do with my knowledge? Traditional philosophers have often assumed that once the conditions for the possibility of knowledge and the ways in which we acquire knowledge are understood, the philosophical job is done. In the same way, traditional detective fiction posits a solution, a notion of order, which marks the conclusion of the investigation.

But for feminist detectives, this is not the end of the story. In particular, the morality of knowing becomes an issue in these texts. What ought one to **do** with knowledge, once one has it? As feminists and outsiders, Warshawski and Nilsen do not have the same obligations to and interests in the status quo as do traditional fictional detectives. As such, the stories of their investigations will never come full circle, and like those who hear the dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus, they will never be placed in the position they inhabited at the beginning. As with Esther in *The Bell Jar*, their experiences will change them. For example, at the end of *Killing Orders* V. I. is told in the scene of denouement, where the criminals confess, that her mother had an affair with a man who committed suicide when she left him. The effect which this knowledge has on V. I. is spelt out in her remark '[s]ince that terrible day at the priory, I can't stop dreaming about it' (p. 232). The more radical indication that the knowledge changes V. I.'s sense of herself comes from a reflection on the meaning of her middle name, Iphigenia, which has Trojan connotations serving as a sign of deception, and of a father's betrayal (p. 232-3). In this way, knowledge is shown to have consequences for the knower both directly and personally.

As representative knowers, the detectives have a responsibility for the consequences of knowing. The most obvious way in which the detectives acknowledge their responsibility for

assessing the justice of situations, occurs in the decision to allow the guilty party to go free. In *Tunnel Vision*, this becomes an issue for V. I. as she comes to terms with the contemptible Fabian getting away with his crimes. She chooses not to have him arrested, as Lotty proposes, because he can do more good for Emily out of prison;

“We need to keep him working - he has to pay for day care and school and therapy and stuff.” (p. 472)

Although this decision is probably the best one in the circumstances, Warshawski isn't pleased that Fabian has escaped formal punishment;

I kept drinking [...]. But I couldn't get drunk. Not even Black Label could wipe the taste of Fabian from my mouth. (p. 473)

The decision not to prosecute Fabian, or even to expose him as an abuser, is on balance the most pragmatic, despite leaving the child abuser with his undeserved freedom, riches, and respect of his peers. The fact that the text resists the automatic response of the generic formula to have Fabian “taken away and dealt with by the authorities” forces the reader to think of the consequences of crime and injustice. V. I.'s own dissatisfaction with the outcome undermines any closure, and urges the reader to share that uncertainty. That finding out has resulted here in “not knowing” is significant, in its pressing the desire to question, and the incitement to read.

Pam also deliberates the morality of her occupation. In *Murder*, when she finds out that Jeremy's murder may have been retributive, she is troubled about going on;

[I]f [Carlos and Benny] had killed Jeremy because he'd caused Amado to be tortured and murdered, who was I to be investigating and looking for justice? Perhaps justice had already been done. (p. 157)

In the end the murderer is found to be Zee, but Pam sympathizes with her and decides that the murder had been the right thing for Zee to do in the circumstances. After confessing, Zee expresses concern about her future;

“[N]ow maybe I'll spend the rest of my life in prison [...]”  
Zee said it quietly, as if it didn't concern her, but her black eyes burned into me, asking for something that I was finally ready to give.  
“No,” I said, “You *can't*.” (p. 179, author's italics)

Pam will not turn Zee over to the police; it is enough that she has been trusted with the information. She is now able to make her own choice as to what to do with that knowledge. Unlike Fabian, Zee does not deserve to be imprisoned, and so if it is up to Pam, cannot be. Where V. I.'s choice to withhold her knowledge about the criminal is made from a view to what will best help the victim, Pam's is made from a consideration of what will be most fair. Letting Zee off is fair not just because the man she murdered was an FBI informer, but also because her motivations for killing him were unselfish; to prevent him from raping Elena. In this sense Zee's actions were heroic, and the system which would punish her does not deserve the information which would allow it to do so.

Of course detectives are not merely offered the opportunity to share knowledge at the end of detective novels. As their investigations progress, both V. I. and Pam pride themselves on their honesty, refusing to treat their knowledge possessively, in the way that many traditional detectives do. In the first novel in the series, Pam tries out the deceptive techniques of the genre's history, but finds that she cannot go on;

How did these hard boiled-egg detectives do it? I couldn't possibly get any information out of her without feeling like a heel. (*Murder*, p. 144)

As the series progresses, Pam develops her techniques of finding out until she finds a style with which she is much more comfortable. By the time she reaches her third investigation, she is able to trust even Miko, who has been trying to seduce her partner. Despite the tension between them, Pam goes to Miko's recording studio to ask her advice on some film reels which she has come across in the course of the investigation. To the reader's surprise, this request for information has the effect of opening her up (*Dog Collar*, p. 177), just as it had with Elizabeth, and although she doesn't learn anything about the case from this discussion, it enables her to trust Miko with the most important evidence she has (p. 179). This culminates in the relaxed session at the end of *Dog Collar*, where Pam sits with her friends filling in the pieces of information which will make everything clearer (chap. 20).

Warshawski has a similar respect for honesty, and disdain for the detective story trick. In *Toxic Shock*, she becomes most impatient with an old friend who has been teasing her with selective information;

“If you wanted to hire me, why couldn’t you have said something about it on the phone?” I asked. “Your step-by-step approach to me isn’t exactly designed to make me feel serious about you [...] Caroline, lay it out for me [...] tell me the whole story, front, middle, and end”.<sup>67</sup>

This is not to say that the detectives are naive. On the contrary, they also know when to keep quiet. Usually they are keen to keep information from those in authority. When Warshawski confirms this pattern, she puts it in terms of reciprocity, confiding that ‘[I]like Bobby, I hate giving information across police barricades’ (*Burn Marks*, p. 103).

This might be seen as a forceful argument that she is denied information as a woman from such patriarchal institutions as the police force, and so has to protect herself and her project by keeping her knowledge from such institutions as might use it for motivations which differ from her own. It is also significant that the institution creates a barrier between V. I. and her father’s friend Bobby Mallory, and also, in *Tunnel Vision*, between V. I. and her policeman lover, Conrad. V. I. confides in the reader that the police are often trying to find out the same things, but that because they fail to act within a context of considerations;

you inevitably end up across a chasm from them: you for mercy, they for justice. You for justice, they for law. (p. 174)

Because the reader has been included within the collaborative interpretative community which examined, for example, Emily’s poem, s/he can be addressed in support of this oppositional view of the police. Sharing knowledge with members of the police force doesn’t work because they fail to see the significance of testimony and of evidence in context;

They didn’t understand me. When I explained that encounter at Home Free two weeks ago, where Charpentier had come out of Jasper’s office and been disconcerted at my mentioning Deirdre’s name, Finchley didn’t think it proved my point at all. (p. 395)

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<sup>67</sup> Sara Paretsky, *Toxic Shock* (London: Gollancz, 1988), pp. 25-26.



The reader, having already been told this story (pp. 82-87), is invited to agree with V. I.'s interpretation, and query Finchley and Conrad's dismissal of the occasion. The two policemen cannot take her story seriously because it does not fit in with the common sense picture which they have established, blaming Emily for her mother's murder, and accounting for V. I.'s version in terms of her 'putting too much emotion into this' (p. 395).

Pam also feels her position as an outsider whenever she comes in contact with the police. But once more her lack of experience shows, as she begins by expecting them to share her concerns and moral attitude to knowledge. This is particularly true in the second novel in the trilogy, where she begins by giving the police detailed information, and then asks if Rosalie couldn't have been the latest victim of a serial killer;

The cop shrugged. "You never know. It may have just been some guy who was mad at getting ripped off by two teenage hookers. [...]"

"You're suggesting that maybe she deserved it?"

The more politic detective said somewhat wearily, "No, of course not." (*Sisters*, p. 10)

The tendency for the policemen to sympathize with 'some guy' rather than the murder victim and her friend leads Pam to immediately reconsider her role as informer in this context; she says 'I felt protective of Trish suddenly' (p. 10). Back with a friend, however, she does not hesitate to reveal the full story (p. 11).

So the feminist detectives consider carefully what they ought to do with their knowledge, and a pattern emerges whereby it is shared with the trustworthy, a group which does not include the police, who seem to separate knowledge from ethical - which they may label emotional - considerations. At the same time, some specific kinds of emotional considerations may be considered by the police to be reasonable grounds for action, such as killing prostitutes when they provoke anger.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> For a study of the bearing which sexual difference has upon the attitudes of law enforcement agencies and institutions to issues of provocation, emotional justification, and what it might be reasonable for someone in a given context to do see Helena Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed: Women and British Justice* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), esp. pp. 222-239.

Ethical considerations then have an important part to play in how feminist detectives use their knowledge, once they have it. But they also recognize their responsibility as potential knowers. Both Paretsky's novels and the Pam Nilsen series include an examination of their detectives' motivations for finding out. How should a potential knower behave? Here once more it is possible to focus upon the position of the individual detective, and how their role is defined by themselves and the text. Because they belong to the same parent genre, feminist detectives share some of the characteristics of traditional detectives - they too are representative, of feminism in the widest sense. However, they are not investigating on behalf of feminists, but rather are "doing it for themselves". They take full responsibility for their position as knowers, and this includes an ethical responsibility which is quite separate from their professions. This moral dimension is often expressed in terms of a "need to know", which overrides other perhaps more rational considerations.

For example, Warshawski makes her living as a detective. But on many occasions, she initiates an investigation purely for the sake of it, and gets paid for it later as an effect of circumstance. This happens in *Burn Marks*, where probing into the origins of a suspicious looking fire on behalf of some homeless people (including her drunken aunt, whom V. I. would gladly never see again) leads to payment from the insurance company to investigate suggestions of arson; in *Deadlock*, where the sudden death of a cousin seems strange; in *Killing Orders*, where V.I. cannot understand why she is being called off a case, and so carries on unpaid; and in *Tunnel Vision*, where Warshawski turns down paid work in order to look into the murder of a charity worker found murdered on V. I.'s desk one evening.

In each of these cases, V. I. feels that she has some kind of obligation to refuse to settle for the knowledge which she has been offered, and to use her skills for finding out to some further end.

This despite the fact that in these and other novels she is warned to leave it to others to find out. Not happy with an official version of knowledge, she wants to find out more information regarding the bigger picture, because it is the right thing to do. This carries a strong feminist message, which is fully in keeping with her position as pioneering representative; she refuses to be satisfied with the information which others want her to have.

Pam does not depend on detective work for her 'bread and cheese',<sup>69</sup> but neither is she taking on the role of detective for fun. She too has trouble explaining her unselfish motives for wanting to know. In *Sisters*, June gets increasingly exasperated at Pam's efforts to locate Trish and found out what happened to Trish's friend Rosalie, warning her off even while she claims to know that such a warning is futile;

"Don't get involved in this, Pam. It's too weird. And you'll get dragged into it, I know how you are [...] The girl is a con artist if ever I've seen one [...] I know these types of girls. I knew them in high school." (p. 23)

Pam struggles to justify her position in response to June's confidence in knowledge she claims to have acquired through experience, but does begin to explain to the reader;

There was nothing I could say to that [...] But I trusted my instincts about Trish somehow. And I wasn't going to send her away without finding out more about her. (p. 24)

Pam refuses to submit to the temptation to think that she knows the kind of person Trish is, and rather resolves to investigate further. In this way Pam's awareness of her role as potential knower turns the tables on June's notion of being 'dragged into' the case, because whereas June's positioning of Trish within a determinate stereotypical role means that her knowledge, and more particularly her confidence in that knowledge, has dragged her into a limited picture of Trish, Pam is able to focus on choosing her own path towards knowledge, and rather place her confidence in her ability to find out more. In this way the potential for knowledge is valued more than the knowledge which I presume myself to have already.

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<sup>69</sup> See *A Study In Scarlet*, p. 23.

One explanation for this offered in the same novel is that I do not always know that which I know. When heavy snow forces Pam and June to abandon their vehicle and make their way through the mountains in the dark, Pam asks June;

“How’s your training in outdoor survival? [...] Do you know how to dig a snow cave for protection and conserve your body heat?”

June professes complete ignorance of such climactic conditions and says that as a Scandinavian, it is Pam who should be aware of how to cope with the cold. Pam confirms that during a trip to Norway to visit relatives, she acquired some useful survival tips. June professes to be relieved that ‘at least one of us is prepared’ (p. 186). Yet when they arrive at the cabin, to find Trish ‘half froze to death’, it is June who takes charge, immediately telling Pam to ‘take off your jacket and go down and look for blankets or something’ (p. 187). June assesses the situation, decides what to do, and offers vital medical information;

“She needs a doctor, but we can’t take her outside in this cold. I’m going to get help. You find some tea or soup or anything hot and start feeding it to her. Keep the fire going and don’t rub her, whatever you do. Friction’s not good for frostbite.” (p. 188)

Pam does not question any element of this detail. Although the disjunction between the knowledge which June professes to have and the knowledge which she demonstrates in this situation remains unacknowledged in the text, this moment, in tandem with her earlier insistence upon empirical knowledge which Pam finds unsatisfactory, may be said to constitute an argument that statements about knowledge which I regard myself to have are not always reliable. As a detective, and a potential knower, Pam learns to choose to ignore explicitly declared knowledge, and act upon knowledge provided by someone who proclaims ignorance. It is her responsibility to decide upon the quality of information with which she is faced.

In this way Pam, like V. I., develops a keen awareness of her own position as potential and actual knower, in relation to other potential and actual knowers in the detective novels in which they feature, and a corresponding sensitivity to the responsibility which that position affords.

## ***Conclusion***

I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter that the way in which detective fiction has been considered to have philosophical potential has in fact highlighted some problems of the tradition in philosophy, and also failed to account for feminist detective stories. In contrast, my examination of the way in which feminist detective stories show a range of philosophical aspects connected with knowledge acquisition at work demonstrates more satisfactorily the philosophical potential of the genre, in the sense in which it constitutes an incitement to read. An epistemological analysis is available in feminist detective novels which focuses on a wide range of questions in connection with knowledge acquisition, often differing greatly from those questions which are considered by traditional philosophical inquiry in the field, yet showing that such questions are epistemologically significant. As well as expanding the philosophical considerations connected to knowledge acquisition, I have shown how detective novels might be said to deal with a specific question posed by analytic philosophy, in the form of the Gettier problem.

Like autographical and utopian fiction, detective fiction may be conceptualized as a genre which is peculiarly suited to feminist philosophical understanding. In addition, my analysis offers another more general contribution to the problem of how it is that literature can be philosophical. In Chapter Two, I argued that the philosophical potential of autographical fiction may offer a contribution in terms of a focus upon the question of who is speaking in philosophical texts, and in Chapter Three, I argued that the philosophical potential of utopian fiction may offer a contribution to the question in terms of a resistance of binary oppositions. In Chapter Four, I have argued that the philosophical potential of detective fiction may offer a contribution to the problem of how it is that literature can be philosophical by focusing upon the ways in which literature may be in a position to effectively show, rather than tell. Specifically here, I have offered evidence that texts within this feminist philosophical genre

usefully show treatments of philosophical problems concerning knowledge of facts about the world, rather than merely telling what is meant by saying that S knows that P. In other words, a crucial part of this chapter has been the emphasis on the way in which fiction is able to demonstrate approaches to philosophical problems. The grounding of my interpretation on contextual significance is, appropriately enough, a demonstration of the application of this idea to the theory of how literature may be philosophical.

## Conclusions

My project in this thesis has been threefold. I have shown that and how literature can be philosophical, such that my answer to this question radically implicates a perspective which has heretofore been neglected or suppressed in the understanding of the relationship between philosophy and literature - a perspective of gender. Secondly, I have shown how feminists may write philosophy, in a way which allows us to speak on and in our own terms, terms which are not restricted by the patriarchal tradition in philosophy. Thirdly, I have shown how philosophy as a field can evolve as a discipline by learning from the novel.

The fulfilment of my project has been effected in terms of three literary genres, which I attempted to define as feminist philosophical. The sense of these three genres reverberates throughout the thesis, which is, in a wider sense, autographical, utopian and detecting. In the first case, this project is a story through which I have sought to make sense of my academic position, caught between philosophy and literature. Rather than choose between the two, I have elected to examine the ways in which their areas of concern overlap. In the second case, I retain a hope for the possibility of conciliation between the two disciplines, that each might learn from the other. I also harbour a utopian conviction that feminist perspectives have vital contributions to make both to philosophy and to literature, and to the various places where they meet. Finally, the notion of finding out, of detecting, in terms of reciprocity, involves a showing and thus a sharing of knowledge and the expressions of knowledge. As such, this work may be viewed as way of employing feminist approaches to the benefit of the disciplines of philosophy and literature. My project of showing how it is that literature can be philosophical, and that feminists can write philosophy, may in these senses be viewed as simultaneously autographical, utopian, and detecting.



In this thesis I have developed three structural arguments to show that literature can be philosophical, reflected in the pattern of feminist philosophical literary genres. The first revealed an emphasis upon the question “who is speaking?”. This question, familiar to literary critics but less so to philosophers, invites both writing and reading thinkers to take responsibility for their position, particularly when talking about the subject position which they occupy, and addressing the subject position occupied by an other. In this way the first structural argument, Chapter Two, rejects metaphysical atomism, and the phallogocentrism of the metaphysics of presence, both of which have been associated with philosophical interpretations of the genre of autobiography, and urges instead the principle of the incitement to read.

The second structural argument, Chapter Three, involved the resistance of binary oppositions. In Chapter One I argued that the value system erected by Plato placed philosophy and literature in a binary opposition, such that literature was understood as whatever philosophy was not, and *vice versa*. This explains why resistance to binary oppositions could be utilized as part of the project to show how it is that literature can be philosophical. Moreover, feminist analyses of the problematic stratification involved in such systems provided a significant backdrop for such resistance, described in terms of an incitement to read. This contrasted with the understanding of literature as philosophical in terms of possible worlds, which I argued presents an interpretation of stories which may count as neither literary nor philosophical.

The third structural argument, Chapter Four, focused upon a philosophical notion of finding out through demonstration. Rejecting a notion of detective fiction as philosophical in the sense that the substantive elements of the genre might be said to have philosophical correlatives, this argument effectively developed notions introduced in earlier chapters, by invoking notions of reciprocity and contextualization. In this way, the argument of Chapter Four sought to reject

both metaphysical atomism and binary oppositions, resolving instead to consider information which might often be ignored by ideal passive readers, and thus participating in the project of an incitement to read.

The result of this project has been a version of the *Meditations*, progressing from autographical fiction and knowledge of the self, through utopian fiction and knowledge of other minds, towards detective fiction and knowledge of the world. Indeed, Descartes' project has much in common with my own. The knee jerk responses to relationships between philosophy and literature which I described in Chapter One show no sign of abating, and just as Descartes wished to sweep away the remnants of scholastic philosophy and start anew, so I sought in Chapter One to begin from the beginning, with Plato's value system, established in the *Republic*, and perpetuated by so many both explicitly and implicitly since. However, unlike Descartes, I am not under any illusions that my meditations mark the end of the matter. Rather than constituting a resolution of the anxiety I feel at the estrangement of philosophy and literature, my arguments and evidence here show that bringing the two together can be a way of addressing difficulties for both disciplines.

As a result of these arguments and evidence, it may be that different philosophical questions can be understood to require different textual approaches. Equally, it may be that literature can be recognized as providing ways of approaching philosophical problems which enable new light to be thrown upon them. In this thesis I have used feminist pathways to make these connections between literature and philosophy, in order to urge a re-viewing of feminist, philosophical, and literary projects as incitements to read. I believe that seeing these three elements in terms of this concept not only facilitates a rejection of the notion of master disciplines, but also offers new opportunities for active analysis which is cooperative and effective as well as democratic.

Once the principle has been demonstrated that literature can be philosophical, the philosophical arguments of literary texts may be subjected to comparative analysis with canonical philosophical texts. This is something which I have avoided in this thesis, lest I fall into the trap in which I see others, of regarding literature in a subservient relationship to philosophy. This is not to deny that useful comparisons may be made between the works of Irigaray and Winterson on maternal mirror images, or those of Levinas and Piercy on relations with others. Indeed, one of the fundamental goals of my thesis was to offer a specific kind of legitimation to such studies, such that they might not be ignored by those whose topics of interest they discuss, and in order to remove the shadow of stratified disciplines. Where Descartes regarded himself to have erected an epistemologically indubitable model of scientific knowledge, I rather hope that I have indicated the problems involved in adopting any such models. Where Descartes believed himself to be an end in himself, I hope that this work does not prove to be a conclusion.

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